

World's Child by Xanthe

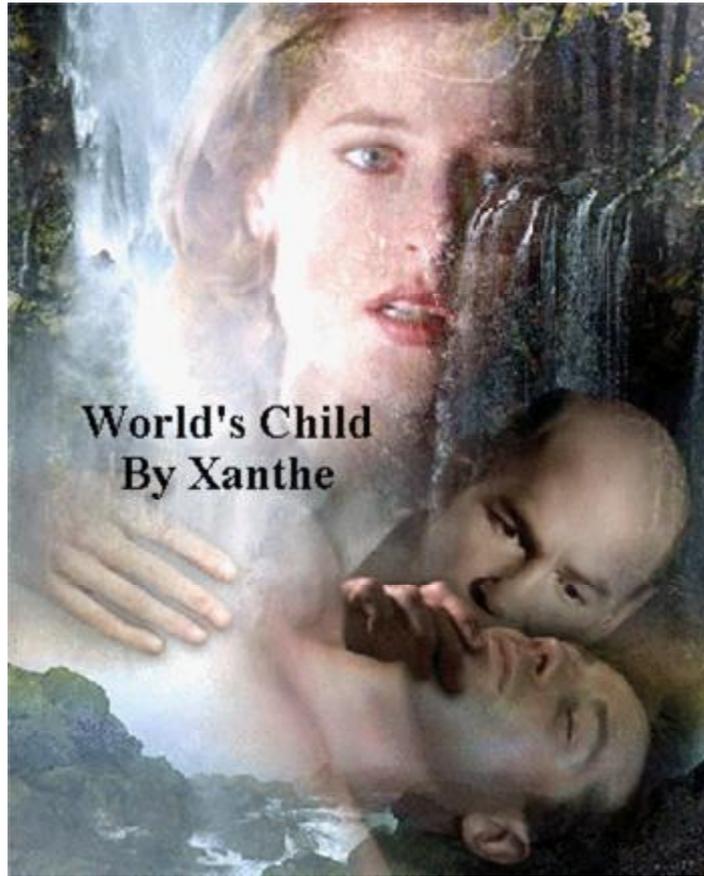
Story Notes:

This story archived at <http://www.xanthe.org/worlds-child/>

Dedication: This is my personal homage to *The X Files* now that the show is over. I think it's also the last time I'll ever try and make sense of canon! I wanted to draw in lots of elements that I loved from the show and give it a fitting farewell. It's first and foremost a post-colonisation story, but it has a strong genfic element too, concerning William. It's very much a slash love story about Mulder and Skinner, but there are also allusions to MSR, a little Doggett/Reyes romance, and even a very small smidgeon of Marita/Alex interaction. The Lone Gunmen, CSM, Samantha Mulder, Luke Doggett, Emily - they're all in this story. I tried to make sense of the 9 seasons of *The X Files*, to draw together as much of canon as I could, particularly focussing on Season 9 eps like *William*, and *The Truth* to produce something that made some sense of my viewing experience, and also, hopefully, to do justice to the many characters I came to love during those 9 years. Yes, the show declined in its later seasons and I'm left feeling it could have been so much more than it was, but, like the girl in the nursery rhyme, when it was good, it was **very**, **very** good.

Thank you: To Phoebe first and foremost for the most fantastic, wonderful, helpful and insightful beta. She really went over and above the call of duty on this one and this story is vastly the more enriched for the time and attention she lavished on it, and most of all for her superb eye for detail.

Thanks also to dot, for fabulous feedback, practical help, research re pronunciation and for her unstinting encouragement to get this huge monster of a story done.



Pic by Mika

A couple of flashlights relieved the gloom of the room and I was finally able to see the man I had only glimpsed in shadow thus far. The demons that drove him weren't anywhere near as visible but I could still catch glimpses of them, and there was something about the raw, hungry light of his eyes that hinted at some great tragedy whose weight he still lived under – maybe more than one. Even when he was still, this man exuded an unceasing restlessness that made me tired to watch him. Most of all, I could not help but feel an intense wave of sympathy for someone who lived in the shadow of a darkness that seemed to have ravaged his very soul. It was impossible not to feel his pain and to want, somehow, to be able to heal it. The danger I sensed was still real, but I saw it was not directed at me but towards himself. Yes he was dangerous, but in the same way a moth is dangerous as it flies into the flame – wild, uncontrolled, but hurting only itself, seemingly oblivious to its own pain as it repeatedly flings itself towards its own wanton destruction.

Extract from *World's Child*, by Xanthe

1. Book One: Uncle Walter by Xanthe

2. Book Two: Father by Xanthe

3. Book Three: Saoshyant by Xanthe

4. Book Four: Mother by Xanthe

Book One: Uncle Walter by Xanthe

Author's Notes:

"At the end of time, Saoshyant Astvatereta, the final Saviour, will make his appearance. He will be a son of Zoroaster, miraculously conceived by a virgin who swims in a lake where Zoroaster's seed has been preserved. When Saoshyant arrives to establish the Kingdom of Righteousness, after a cosmic year (approximately 12,000 earthly years) there will be a general resurrection of both the good and the evil. Saoshyant will purify both the wicked and the righteous by causing all to pass through a river of molten metal (obtained through the melting of the mountains). This experience will be pleasant for the righteous (like being bathed in warm milk) but agonizing for the wicked (until all sins are purged away)."

John Bowker, "Zoroastrianism," *World Religions*

I think everyone is familiar with every single detail of that apocalyptic day, ten years ago, when our old world came to an end and the new one began. Literally thousands of books have been written about it, countless documentaries have been made, and we have been bombarded with innumerable films and TV reconstructions – all detailing that day and the events leading up to it. Everybody in the world knows where they were and what they were doing on that day, and, as I was at the centre of it, the public appetite for information about me has been insatiable. I don't mind that – I understand the curiosity, but there's always a certain human element missing, and I thought it was time I filled in that gap. I **am** human, after all, despite all the myths and legends that have sprung up around me. I didn't just emerge from a chrysalis at the age of ten to take part in the most momentous occasion in our history; I was raised, nurtured, and protected by a group of brave people who I can never thank enough for their love and kindness to me over the years. Not all those people are still alive; some died protecting me, but I have never stopped loving them.

I'm often asked in interviews what my early childhood was like and my reply is always the same – which one? There were four distinct phases to my childhood – but the one thing I can say is that I was much loved in all of them, despite all that happened to me during my growing years.

My first childhood took me to the age of about 10 months. I have some memories of my birth mother but more of her later. Just before my first birthday I was adopted. That was the second stage of my childhood and it lasted until I was 6 years old. I remember those early years vividly – perhaps it's because of the unique make up of my brain but I've always had the ability to see both my own life and the lives of those around me in particularly sharp colours. My memory is unusual but as a child I didn't know that other people didn't see the subtleties and nuances of colour and shape the way I did, that they didn't remember smells and sounds

and touch as vividly as if they were actually happening. Back then there was a lot I didn't know.

My adoptive parents were good people. Hard working, conservative, and kind; they didn't have a hope in hell of understanding me. Sometimes, even back then, I felt like a changeling. I didn't belong – I knew that from the moment I was able to understand anything. I loved my mother and father but I knew I didn't belong with them, and, more worryingly, I knew I wouldn't stay with them either. My folks kept themselves to themselves – if it hadn't been for their desire to adopt me then I don't think they'd have ventured out into the world at all, and once they had me, they closed their doors once more and returned to the simple, peaceful way of life that they loved so much. They lived on a ranch in Wyoming – it wasn't a big place, and they were pretty poor. They were as self-sufficient as possible, and Dad supplemented the rest of our income with his carving, leaving Mom free to keep the house – and educate me. I was home-schooled because my Mom had a panic about me being out of her sight – I guess she had waited so long to have a child that she was over-protective of me. Even aside from that, my parents were extremely religious, and didn't want much to do with what they saw as a godless world if they could avoid it; we were cut off on the small ranch, visits to the closest town were rare, and we didn't even have a television in the house, so I led a peculiarly insular life. It was probably this that kept me safe during the early years of my life.

My mother had long dark hair and a permanently worried expression. She fretted about almost everything – whether we'd have enough money to see us through the winter, whether the animals on the ranch would fall ill, whether I was too cold or too hot, whether I was happy. I **was** happy enough but even back then I felt that this wasn't my real life although I was too small to put that feeling into words. I was waiting, although for what I did not know. I didn't have any idea how big a finger of destiny was pointing at me. I played in the dirt in the yard, ran after the chickens clapping my hands, and generally got underfoot. Sometimes I could sit for hours just staring into space – this worried my mother and father who even thought that I might be autistic, but of course that wasn't the case – in fact it was the exact opposite if anything. It was clear from a very early age that not only was I very verbal, but also that I was far more articulate than I should have been for my age and from the moment I could talk I was incredibly precocious. My perception of the world was also very different; I could see the world in sharper colours, hear sounds that weren't audible to anyone else. I could open my mouth and taste the world on my tongue; I could identify hundreds of different scents all mingled together – the roses and lilac that wound around the house, the 14 different animal scents from the barn, the sweet, rich smell of the alfalfa growing in the field, the sharp tang of gas from the cars that sped by in the road a mile or two from the ranch...all of them mingled together and yet I could identify each and every single one of them. I could see a spectrum of colours – when my mother and father looked at a tree they saw only that it had green leaves, but if I sat still and concentrated, I could see subtle variations of shade as the sun lit the underside of each leaf. I could even hear the rasping legs of a wandering caterpillar crawling over them. The world was a place of sensory delight to me, and sometimes I would become lost in its beauty, in its sounds and sights, to the point where I could block out everything and everyone else around.

My father didn't like me being different. If he saw me standing and staring, he'd lift me up, give me a chore to do, anything to jolt me out of my strangeness. He'd never let me just **be**, and just being was important to me – it made me feel connected, and at one with my surroundings. My mother was more indulgent but my silences scared her and she worried

and fretted over me until I learned to take myself off, away from them both, so that I could have some peace.

My fifth year was a very important one, because that was when Uncle Walter arrived on the ranch. I can still remember that day more vividly than most. It was late summer, and my father was busy putting up the second cut of hay. He was out at dawn and didn't return until nightfall. My parents weren't wealthy – they had a small cow-calf operation at a time when the big feedlots dominated, and it was a struggle to make ends meet so we were always hovering close to the borders of poverty. My father couldn't afford anyone to help with the work, so, back then, it seemed as though Uncle Walter was heaven sent, a guardian angel, come to help us in our time of need. Come to think of it, that's still pretty much the way I think of him, although he'd growl at me and shake his head if I said as much in his hearing.

It was late afternoon and the shadows were long. I was sitting staring at a centipede as it walked along the dusty path that led to the gate. I was transfixed by the sight of its multitude of tiny legs, and the little pitter-patter sound they made, that only I could hear. In fact, I was so engrossed that I didn't notice the sound of the gate opening at the end of the lane. Usually I can hear people coming a mile or two away, but not this time. I didn't notice anything until a large shadow loomed over me, blocking out the sunlight. Startled, I glanced up. I was a small boy, kneeling in the dirt, and from the angle I was crouching, Uncle Walter seemed to be a giant. He had long legs and a broad, powerful chest, and the fading evening sun was glancing off the back of his shining, almost-bald scalp. I gazed at him for a long time, and he gazed at me. I've never known anyone who could hold my gaze for so long without looking away or asking if I was okay and why was I staring but it seemed that Uncle Walter was as fascinated by me as I was by him. I swear that I saw the sun start to set behind him before either of us made a move or spoke. Then, after a long period of mutually fascinated study, he cleared his throat and smiled. I smiled back. I liked him immediately. I've always been a creature of instinct, and I knew, somehow, deep inside, that this was the most important thing that had happened to me in my short life so far. In fact, that meeting may well have been the single most important thing that ever happened to me.

"You must be William," he said, his voice deep but friendly. I stared at him for a moment. My name wasn't William and yet – William sounded right, and I knew that it was my proper name, my real name, and the name I should bear. I frowned.

"My parents call me Adam," I told him.

He paused for a moment, considering this, as if it was unexpected and yet, when he thought about it, inevitable as well. He was wearing a pair of spectacles and I was fascinated by the way the sunlight caught the glass and made his warm brown eyes flash.

"Ah. Adam. Yes. It's nice to meet you." He bent down and held out his hand and I stared at it. Nobody had ever wanted to shake my hand before. I was a child; nobody shook a child's hand. Uncle Walter was like that – he always treated me as if he saw the person I was inside, the person I would one day become, and not the child I then was. I took his hand, and if a choir of angels had suddenly started singing and the heavens had opened up at that moment in time I wouldn't have been surprised. His hand was warm, and the minute my small paw disappeared inside it I knew that I would be safe with this man. The contact also provided something else – a memory of a name. I looked up at him, and I remember feeling a little surprised as this had never happened to me before, although he says I was so self assured that

you'd never have guessed. He also says that my solemn, knowing expression scared the shit out of him – but not as much as when I opened my mouth and said:

"Uncle Walter. I've been waiting for you."

His eyes flashed again although whether it was the sunlight or shock I don't know. His jaw did a little sideways movement – a characteristic gesture that would soon become very familiar to me.

"Have you?" He frowned, and then laughed. "Well, maybe you have," he said with a shrug. "How did you know my name, Will...I mean Adam?"

"It's okay. You can call me William when my parents aren't around to hear," I reassured him. I never did answer how I came to know his name. I just did. I think maybe that I was born knowing his name.

At that moment I heard a voice calling the name my adoptive parents had given me and we both turned to the sound of it.

"Adam, what are you...? Oh...hello...can I help you?" My mother came to a halt, flustered, and gazed at the stranger. He smiled, and bowed his head courteously.

"Mrs. Granger? My name is Walter Skinner. I'm looking for..." he paused and glanced down at me. "Work," he finished. She shook her head, and grabbed my hand, yanking me away from him as if she was afraid he'd steal me. My mother was always over-protective of me. She'd wanted a child for years, and when I came along she could never quite believe I was hers to keep – she was always scared I'd disappear. Looking back, maybe she was more prescient than I realised. There was always danger around me, even back then. That, after all, was why Uncle Walter had come, even though I didn't know that at the time.

"We don't have any work," my mother said. "We can't afford to pay anyone."

"I don't need to be paid," Uncle Walter said softly. "I'm happy enough to work for my keep and somewhere to sleep - the barn maybe?" He glanced at the barn. "You look as if you have a lot of work going on with the harvest – I'm sure I could be of some help."

My mother shook her head again.

"I don't think so. I'll have to ask my husband but I don't think so," she said, and I just stood there, serenely, smiling at Uncle Walter. I knew, even if she didn't, that he'd be staying.

As it turned out, my father twisted his ankle that very afternoon, and, by the time he came hobbling into the house a couple of hours later, it was badly swollen. He couldn't afford to sit around doing nothing until it healed, but he knew he was in no shape to get the work done either – it's hardly surprising that in the circumstances the offer of help from someone who wasn't even asking money for his labour was too tempting to refuse. And thus it was that Uncle Walter came to stay with us.

He worked hard, although I don't think it was the kind of work he was used to. For all his height and sheer brute strength, he wasn't a young man, and his fingers were smooth and

clean. His whole bearing spoke of a man who wasn't used to hard, physical farm work, and yet I never heard him complain. I think, maybe, he might have done some work on a farm or ranch a long time ago, because he had some skills – and he brought a pack containing everything he'd need, including tools, gloves, work clothes, boots, and a sleeping bag. He fully intended to find work with us, to make himself indispensable, and to stay as long as he could. He wasn't even put off by the living conditions – my mother wouldn't have a stranger sleeping in the house and insisted he bunked down in the dilapidated hired man's room attached to the barn. Every evening I would creep out of bed and visit him there. His fingers were raw, cracked, and bleeding and I'd watch as he bound them with strips from an old shirt that he kept in his bag. The one electric light bulb strung up in the room lit his face, making his eyes seem dark and intriguing, full of mysteries that involved me, but which he wasn't yet ready to divulge. I would sit beside him and he would put his arm around me and tell me stories. I'm not sure why I was so drawn to him – he'd be the first to admit that his stories were pretty dire to begin with. He clearly had little or no recent experience of either small children or ranch work, and yet somehow he managed to make a success of both. So much so, that when winter came, he ended up staying. He was just too useful to have around and he asked for so little and gave so much, from his unstinting work on the ranch to the attention he paid to me.

My parents were apprehensive at first – he was a stranger after all, and he was showing a lot of interest in me. My mother was particularly concerned, and watched me and asked me a lot of questions about the amount of time I spent with Uncle Walter, but I was so happy around him, and Walter was so useful to have around that eventually she started to relax, and accept him, although she never let him become close enough to think he was part of the family. He was the hired man, and my folks treated him as such, and kept him at arm's length.

Uncle Walter was a reader. He kept a pile of books in his room, and frequently walked into town to visit the little library there and pick up some more. I loved just snuggling up against him and watching those big, blunt fingers of his turn the pages on the latest book he was reading. I could lie for hours like that, lost in the silence and the comforting warmth of his companionship. When I asked, he would tell me about the books he was reading – he was something of a civil war buff and he taught me all about the various battles and the life stories of some of the people who fought in them, and why the war happened in the first place. He had another area of interest though – he liked factual books about UFO's. I never understood why he read them, as he seemed to spend most of his reading time arguing with them out loud, or cursing them for ignorance under his breath, but it was as if he was searching for some kind of important information, something that would make the subject slot into place for him and suddenly make sense.

Walter would often get books out of the library with the sole intention of reading them to me, but I much preferred listening to the stories Uncle Walter made up himself.

In the beginning, Uncle Walter's stories were all about people who wore suits and lived in a big city, but I didn't really have the experiences to understand or process the stories, so he began to change them. He told me about a beautiful red haired woman, and a brilliant dark haired man who went to towns and farms and various remote places, investigating monsters. I loved hearing those monster stories. My eyes would grow as round as saucers and I'd nestle in close to him, and he'd always keep that big arm comfortingly wrapped around my shoulders, keeping me safe. I had my favourite stories of course.

"Tell me the one about the man with yellow eyes," I'd beg shamelessly, and he'd sigh and gather me close but he never once refused me.

"Once upon a time there was a man called Eugene Tooms who was so old that he'd been alive for over a hundred years," he'd begin, and I'd feel that familiar thrill of anticipation, listening to his deep, rich voice, intoning in the shadowy, dimly lit room. I loved hearing how clever Agent Scully, and witty Agent Mulder would defeat the many foes they encountered.

"When I grow up, do you think I could be an FBI agent?" I asked Uncle Walter when he finished.

He gazed at me solemnly. "I think you'd make a very good agent, William," he replied.

"As good as Agent Mulder and Agent Scully?" I pressed eagerly. He smiled and gently smoothed my dark hair away from my forehead.

"Why not?" He murmured, his eyes misty and faraway. "Why not?"

He lived simply – stretching out on an old iron spring bed in the hired man's room at night, and joining us for meals during the day, but it soon became clear that his priority wasn't the ranch work – it was me. He sought out every opportunity to be with me, and the plain truth is that I bonded with him much more than I had with my own parents. Mom and Dad did their best, but they wanted me to fit into their lives, to be what they wanted me to be. Uncle Walter wasn't like that. He had much more time for me than my parents did, busy as they were running the ranch. When Uncle Walter wasn't working he was with me – that was how he spent every free second of his leisure time. He taught me how to carve little animals out of wood, and bought me my first penknife, which my mother immediately confiscated as she was scared I'd cut myself. Uncle Walter wasn't like that – he didn't wrap me up in cotton wool. He'd go walking with me around the fields, woods and meadows. It was Uncle Walter who first taught me how to swim in the little pond behind the ranch, not my father. My father was a good man, but he wanted me to go at his pace, to learn the things he wanted me to know – Uncle Walter stepped into my world, and he was the first adult to do so. Uncle Walter wasn't freaked out when I stared into space for hours on end. Sometimes I'd disappear inside my head at noon and wake up as the sun was going down, to find Uncle Walter still sitting patiently beside me, usually whittling away at a piece of wood, waiting for me to come back to the world. He never tried to chide me or jolt me out of it - instead he asked me what it was I saw that I could stare so intently for so long. I tried to explain the many subtle variations of colour, the depth and richness of sound and taste and touch and he listened without interrupting, in a way that my parents never did. He was truly fascinated by me and didn't seem at all surprised that I was different – he didn't make me feel bad about it either. Instead he asked questions and tried to understand me, and I loved him all the more for it.

It must have been hard for my parents though – seeing me become so close to him, and I picked up on their unease. Yet it was to Walter I ran, crying, when I hurt myself, and to Walter that I confided everything of my babyish hopes and dreams and fears. I wanted him to be proud of me, and that was why I remember the incident with the duck so vividly.

We were out by the pond, he and I. It was evening and he was tired after a hard day's work on the ranch, but I had insisted we go out there because I loved it so much. I didn't really understand why we couldn't spend all day out by the pond, or exploring the woods – it

annoyed me that he had to work. He indulged me as much as he could, but he did still need a reason to stay at the ranch, and if he had shirked his work he knew my father would have sent him packing. All the same, any free time he had he spent with me. On this occasion I'd dragged him out to the lake, and he picked up a smooth stone and threw it onto the flat surface of the water, where, much to my astonishment, it leaped out again, not once, not twice, but three times before disappearing from sight.

"Uncle Walter! How did you do that?" I jumped up and down excitedly. "Show me! Show me please!" I begged, and, laughing, he did, but I was too small to master the technique, and every single stone I threw fell in and sank without a trace. I grew angry, and my throws grew wilder, and I became even more frustrated until, in a fit of temper, I threw one of my stones at a nearby duck who was paddling happily along. It hit her and she gave a squawk of alarm, although she wasn't seriously hurt. She made off quickly, and I turned to Uncle Walter, a triumphant look in my eyes – I could at least hit targets, even if I couldn't make the stones hop.

"See, I hit it! I hit the duck!" I yelled excitedly, only to find him shaking his head. I'll never forget the look of profound disappointment I saw in his dark eyes that day. I knew, then and there, that I would go through hellfire and back rather than see that disappointment ever again knowing that I was the cause of it.

"What did the duck do to you, William?" He asked me quietly, and his low tone and soft voice hurt me more than all the yelling in the world.

"She's a duck!" I complained. "She doesn't matter! We eat the chickens in the yard so what's wrong with throwing a stone at a duck?"

He stood there for a moment, considering this. "William, we raise the chickens for our table, and we treat them well. We don't hurt them for fun – when we kill them it's for food."

I stared at him blankly, feeling resentful. My father would never have given me a lecture for this, and it annoyed me that Uncle Walter was making such a fuss about it.

"I don't care about the stupid old duck," I told him, kicking my feet in the dirt.

He looked at me solemnly for a long time, his dark eyes thoughtful, and then seemed to come to a decision. He sat down beneath a tree, and gathered me close beside him. I went, still feeling resentful.

"William, you're young and normally I wouldn't talk about this with you, but I'm afraid that you won't be allowed to grow up in your own time. The world is changing too much for that." He glanced at the darkening sky, with a worried look. "We don't have much time, William, and while I don't want you to grow up worried and scared of your future, at the same time I have a duty and responsibility to prepare you for that future now – I think you'd hate me more if I didn't prepare you than if I do."

"Prepare me for what?" I asked in a small voice, suddenly scared and no longer even caring about the duck.

"William, at some point in the future the fate of the world may well rest on your shoulders," he said softly, his big arm wrapped warmly around me, keeping me safe as always, despite what he was telling me. "That may sound scary, but I believe it's the truth. You're a very special little boy, William." I stared at him, but he wasn't saying anything that surprised me. Even at that tender age I already knew that I was different and that some big task awaited me in my life. "When the day comes that the world needs you, William, you'll need to love the world – not just me, or your mom and dad, or this ranch, but the whole world. You'll need to love it enough to want to save it. I think in many ways you already do – you see things that nobody else does, and you're already half in love with the colours and the sounds and the smells that you've described to me so vividly. That duck – she's part of this world, part of the whole. She's part of what we might one day lose, part of what's at stake..." His voice choked in his throat and I flung my arms around his neck, and held on tight. Most of what he said went right over my head, but the serious tone in which he said it, and the look in his eyes, made me believe that what he'd said was of the utmost importance. He also confirmed to me something that I had understood on some level but had never been able to put into words, or even to consciously know until he said it; he confirmed to me that I was special, that I had a destiny, and was marked out for some great purpose.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Walter," I whispered, and then I began sobbing against his shirt. "I'm sorry, duck!" I cried. I opened my mind to send the message to the assaulted duck and instead found myself a creature of feather and beak. I could feel the water beneath me, as my big orange feet paddled almost noiselessly... and there was a small, aching pain in my side where I'd been hit with a stone. Startled, I jolted out of the moment of empathy and that was when I began sobbing in earnest. That was the first time I'd ever had the experience of being inside another creature's skin and it scared the hell out of me. Uncle Walter held me tight while I cried my eyes out on his shirt. I was crying for more than the duck though – I was crying for myself, and for a kind of loss of innocence. Uncle Walter was right – he did have to tell me, and he did have to begin preparing me, but all the same, I knew that I had lost a part of my childhood that day. I also knew that I never, ever wanted Uncle Walter to be disappointed by me ever again. His disappointment was too terrible to bear. I vowed then and there that I would do everything I possibly could to make him proud of me, even if that meant saving the entire planet.

The first real trauma to rock my little world came when I was 6 years old. My father had become increasingly jealous of my relationship with Uncle Walter – I clearly viewed the big man as more of a father figure than my actual father and that upset my dad. He was a good man, and didn't deserve my disdain, but I was a child, and I just knew who I liked best and who I wanted to be with. Nobody could ever replace my mother – she was warm baths in winter and cold drinks in summer, she was my soft haven, where I could rest and cuddle up when I was tired. My father was a different matter, and a tense atmosphere developed in the house whenever Walter was there with us. It came to a head one day in the early summer of my 6th year when my father took me out to the pond and told me he was going to teach me how to swim. I'll never forget the look on his face when I told him that Uncle Walter had already taught me the previous summer. My father was so unconnected with my world that he hadn't even known – my excited chatter about the event had clearly gone in one ear and out the other. He took one look at me, stalked back to the house, and fired Uncle Walter on the spot. I stood there, aghast, tears in my eyes, and Walter looked back at me, dumbfounded – he clearly hadn't expected this. My father strode into the house and Walter lost no time in striding in there after him.

"Nathaniel, please – what have I done?" He asked, in that calm, sensible tone he always had – Walter was a strange cross between warrior and diplomat.

"You've gotten too close to Adam. The boy isn't yours, Walter."

"I know that," Walter agreed but something in his eyes said that I wasn't Nathaniel Granger's boy either and my father picked up on that and became enraged.

"It isn't right. There's something..." My father paused. "Something unnatural about it," he sneered. I'm sure he didn't mean it – he was just upset, but the look on Walter's face showed how angered and devastated he was by that remark.

"I haven't laid a finger on that boy. I couldn't," he said vehemently while I watched, not understanding this part of the conversation, but feeling all too clearly how it had upset both these men who I loved very much.

"I'm not saying you have but what do we really know about you? Who are you really, Walter? Why did you come here? Where are you from? I should have asked more questions at the time but it's too late for that now – I've gotta protect **my** boy and you've got to leave."

I saw Walter struggle to control his emotions, and his jaw did a familiar sideways click – he wanted to stay badly, but my father's words and the implication in them had upset him almost beyond endurance.

"This is absurd, Nathaniel," Walter remonstrated, still trying his hardest to win my father round. "You're just upset. It'll all look different tomorrow. Let me stay until then at least."

"NO! I want you to leave now. If you don't, I'll get my shotgun," my father replied. I'm not sure whether he meant it or not, but he was too worked up to be rational. Uncle Walter took one final, long, hard look at my father and then faced up to the reality that there was nothing he could do that would change his mind. I let out a howl, realising that the battle had been fought and lost. Walter turned on his heel and left the house without another word – with me following close behind. My father called me back but I ignored him – all I could think about was that Walter, my ally, the only person in the whole world who seemed to understand me, was leaving.

"Please don't go!" I begged, as he returned to the hired man's room to gather his belongings. "Please, Uncle Walter. Don't leave me. They don't understand. They don't **know**," I told him urgently.

"I know," he replied, "but your father's made up his mind. He's talking about getting his shotgun if I don't leave. I don't have a choice, William."

"But what about me?" I cried, with the self-absorption of childhood. "What will I do without you?"

"Hush, William," he chided. "I won't be far, boy. Did you really think I could abandon you? Of course I can't! I have to watch over you in ca..." He bit his tongue at that. I think he was going to say something more, something about the danger that always threatened me, that I had sometimes glimpsed in the shadows out of the corners of my eyes, but he didn't want to

alarm me. Instead he crouched down to my level, put his hands on my shoulders, and looked me in the eyes. "I'll be nearby, William. I'll find a way to let you know where." I could almost see his mind working frantically to figure out the details. "I'll leave a message for you, out by the pond, or..." he began before shaking his head violently. "Christ, what am I thinking? I won't need to leave a message. William..." He looked at me earnestly. "You'll have to look for me, but that won't be hard for you, will it?" He gave a smile, and gently brushed my cheek with his hand. "You'll be able to hear me and smell me – right?" He whispered. I gazed at him, and then nodded slowly.

"Yes...I'll be able to find you," I whispered back. "But it won't be the same as having you here!" I launched myself at him, wrapped my arms around his neck and clung to him, and he held me tight.

"You have to be strong, William," he told me firmly.

"I don't want to be strong!" I complained, rubbing my snotty nose on the collar of his shirt.

"We all have to do things we don't want to," he told me in a firm, no-nonsense, very Walter-like tone. I hung in his arms limply for a moment, my cheek against his shoulder, sobbing quietly, and he held me, his big hands rubbing warm circles on my back until at last my crying quietened. Then he disengaged me and put me back down on the ground. "Be strong for me, William," he told me fiercely, and I nodded, wanting him to be proud of me.

"I'll pretend I'm Agent Mulder," I told him, squaring my chin and trying to look grown up. "I'll pretend I'm Agent Mulder going into a dark house to face monsters. I have to be brave."

Walter's jaw did a savage sideways clench, but he managed to squeeze out a smile. "Agent Mulder would be proud of you, William," he told me, his voice sounding jerky, and full of some emotion I couldn't understand.

"And you?" I asked, timorously. "Will you be proud of me, Uncle Walter?"

He smiled and tousled my hair. "Always, William," he said, before depositing a kiss on my cheek. He grabbed his pack and then, with one last look over his shoulder at me, he walked out of that room that I'll always associate with him, leaving it neater, cleaner and a damn sight homelier than when he'd moved in. I gazed around the little room forlornly; it seemed so empty now, devoid of his reassuring presence. The room seemed haunted by the absence of his sleeping bag, his books, his pack and even his spare pair of glasses, which he kept on the rickety little table next to the bed. The emptiness of that room hurt me, but not as much as the loss of him, the solid, comforting presence of the man himself.

I found my mother and father standing by the house, watching him go. My father even had the shotgun in his hands although I think that was to justify his earlier tirade rather than because he thought Walter was any serious threat to us. The ironic thing is that in sending Walter away, my father sealed the fate of us all – himself, my mother, and me, in a way that he could never foresee, and paved the way for the greatest tragedy of my young life.

I waited a few days before searching for Walter and I had to steel myself to wait that long, but Mom and Dad were jumpy and suspicious and my father's hand was never far from his shotgun. I don't think it was Walter they were worried about – I think it was the general sense

of impending disaster that wrapped itself around us like a suffocating cloak that summer. It was so close to us that even people like my parents, who couldn't see what I saw, or sense what I sensed, somehow picked up on the vague feeling of unrest and danger that lurked just on the edges of our world. The ranch, that had once been the source of such peace, enjoyment and love for me, took on a sinister aspect. Sometimes I woke at nights barely able to breathe – the place seemed stagnant and the air around it heavy with a sickly smell I could not identify. I lacked energy, and often sat, just staring at my mother as she worked in the house. She was on edge, every loud noise making her jump, and she was more protective of me than ever. I accepted her cuddles with eagerness, wanting to make the most of a commodity that I suspect I knew, even back then, would soon be in short supply. I'll never forget the cinnamon scent of her clothes, and the smell of cookies baking in the kitchen, the feel of her soft dark hair against my cheek and the lilting sound of her voice as she sang to me. She was the only mother I really knew and I remember her still. One day, as I watched her baking, a fly landed on her arm, and I let out a terrible, wordless scream. In my mind, I saw a swarm of flies, covering her body, while her sweet, sickly-scented blood washed out of the house and down the front steps. My mother, her back to me, hadn't seen my reaction, but I knew that I had to get out of that house, had to find Walter, before it was too late – although too late for what I didn't dare voice, even to myself.

I ran and ran, trying to escape the nightmarish buzzing sound in my head, and the memory of something that had not yet happened. I found myself in the woods and it was only in their cool, reassuring darkness that I began to calm down. I sat for a moment, trying to focus on Uncle Walter's scent, and the sound of his rich, deep voice, and soon I heard a whisper of him on the wind. I got up, and began to follow that whisper. I closed my eyes the better to concentrate, and found that I could see the forest as perfectly as if I had my eyes open – every footstep I took was sure, I didn't trip, or slip, or fall, despite the fact that my eyes were clenched tightly, and all the time I was following that whispering scent. Then it was all around me, and I found myself coming to a standstill in a small, grassy clearing, next to a tinkling stream. I opened my eyes, and looked around – it felt strange to be using my eyes to see instead of that sixth sense in my head. I could see signs of a little camp – there was Walter's pack and sleeping bag on the ground, partially covered by a lean-to tarp, and the remains of a little campfire, still smouldering, but there was no sign of him. I was about to call out when there was a flurry of activity above, and something landed beside me.

"Uncle Walter!" I berated as he swung me up in his arms. "I knew you had to be here but I couldn't see you! You were spying on me!"

"Yes, I was," he admitted with a grin. "I heard you coming and shinned up this tree – I didn't know who it was. I couldn't believe it when you walked in here with your eyes shut. Did you walk all the way like that, William?" His dark eyes were intense and questioning.

"Yes. It was easier to follow the trail this way," I told him, nodding. He was the only person I felt safe confiding my abilities to – I knew better than to let my parents know just how different I was.

"Have you ever done that before?" He asked and I shook my head.

"No. This was new – I didn't know I could do it." I grinned at him excitedly.

"You're a special boy, William," he told me softly. "I suspect there are lots of other things

you can do that you don't know about yet as well."

I nodded, because I was sure he was right, and then I glanced around his makeshift home.

"There's no shelter except for that," I complained, pointing at his tarp. "You can't live out here, Uncle Walter."

"I've lived worse places," he told me.

"Where?" I demanded, plonking myself down on his sleeping bag. He sat down beside me and gazed at me solemnly.

"A place called Vietnam," he told me, and there was a sound in his voice that I hadn't heard before.

"Why was that worse? What happened there?" I asked, almost breathless. His dark eyes were like whirlpools, sucking me in, lost in a distant, savage memory.

"There was a war. I was a marine – a soldier," was all he said. Simple enough, but the expression in his eyes told a much darker story. I grabbed his hand to offer comfort and a dozen images flashed through my mind. I was running through a forest – a very different one to this, with different trees and plants and different smells and sounds. I was with friends – people I had come to view almost as family, other young men like myself. And then the sky turned black, and the sound of gunfire rent the air, and soon my friends were screaming, their blood rising up like a red tide to obscure my view, and then I was falling, my flesh ripped apart, and all around me was pain.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Walter," I told him, stroking his hand, my heart beating too fast in my chest. "I'm sorry about that place." Even though the memories were of a long time ago, I could still feel them like raw wounds in Walter's psyche.

"I've a feeling that there's a worse war yet to be fought," Walter told me.

"Those men, your friends, did they die? How come you didn't die?" I asked him and he went very still.

"What did you see, William?" He asked me softly and it was only then I realised he hadn't told me anything about the men, or what had happened to him in Vietnam. I bit on my lip.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I just...when I touched your hand...I saw you in a forest with your friends, and then there was shooting...and you were hurt..." I gazed up at him, a little fearfully, wondering if he would be angry that I had somehow had access to one of his most personal memories.

"Have you ever done that before?" He asked me.

"A little," I admitted. "Not often – but sometimes I just can't help it. When it's a strong memory, when I'm touching the person...it all comes flooding out. I don't know a way to stop it."

"That's okay. You haven't done anything wrong," he said. "Just...we might need to find a way for you to control it, or it'll upset you. Okay?"

"Okay," I agreed, resting my head against his shoulder. I wondered whether I should tell him about the flies I had seen on my mother, but decided against it – it wasn't the same thing. It wasn't a memory of what had happened. What I didn't realise back then, as a child, was that it's possible to have a memory of something that hasn't yet happened. I sometimes wonder whether my life would have been different if I'd told Walter of my premonition – but I suspect, somehow, that the end result would have been the same. I believe that there are some things that have to happen, some things about which we have absolutely no choice – Walter and his Vietnam was one of those things, and me and my parents were another.

I visited him whenever I could – not every day but whenever possible. I don't know how he lived, but he looked more and more gaunt as the days passed, so I started sneaking food out of the house for him. It was mostly whatever I could salvage from the kitchen, and my idea of what constituted a good meal rather than his, but he always seemed pretty grateful for the presents of squashed peanut butter sandwiches and the ceaseless supplies of chocolate chip cookies that I pressed into his hands, and ate them with gusto. As that last, long, hazy summer of my childhood came to a close, I crept out of bed one night, wandered through the woods, and found him lying drowsily in his little camp, looking at the stars. He berated me for a while for coming to see him at night, when it was dangerous, and I replied, solemnly, that the danger wasn't here yet, and although his eyes widened, he seemed to accept that.

"Tell me a story about Agent Mulder and Agent Scully," I requested, slipping under the blanket beside him.

"Not another one!" He groaned, but it was a token protest and we both knew it. An idea seemed to occur to him and he looked at me thoughtfully and then began to speak. "Once upon a time, Agent Scully grew lonely."

"Why?" I asked, wide eyed. "She had Agent Mulder to be friends with!"

"That's true – she also had other friends." Uncle Walter paused, looking a little sad. I nudged him to continue. "But, people can get lonely all the same. Agent Scully had grown up with two brothers and a sister and she wanted a family of her own. She wanted a baby."

"Were she and Agent Mulder married?" I asked naively, wondering how Agent Scully could have a baby if she wasn't married.

"No, no they weren't." Uncle Walter's eyes crinkled at the sides as he smiled.

"Ookay." I shrugged, wondering where the monsters were in this story.

"But Agent Scully had a baby anyway," Uncle Walter told me. "She had a beautiful baby boy, and she loved him very much."

"Was this after Agent Mulder got taken away by the spaceship?" I interrupted, wanting to know where this particular tale came in the storyline. Uncle Walter's stories always had a context. I'd often ask if this was before the yellow eyed man, or after Agent Mulder's office burned down and sometimes Uncle Walter would have to pause and give it some thought and

when I nudged him he'd tell me to be patient because he wasn't as young as he used to be and he couldn't remember **all** the details. I was struck by his use of the word 'remember' but I think even from the beginning I knew that he wasn't making these stories up as he went along.

"This was after Agent Mulder got returned to us," Uncle Walter said. He often spoke like that, as if he was actually there in the story, although he had never mentioned what he did or what he was to Agent Mulder and Agent Scully if he **was** there.

"How soon after?" I pressed.

"I don't remember. It all happened around the same time," Uncle Walter protested. "Now, do you want to hear this story or not?"

"Are there any monsters in it?"

He laughed out loud. "Only one – and he's more of a munchkin than a monster," he told me, looking straight at me.

"Okay then," I sighed, not really understanding a word he was saying but wanting to listen anyway, even if there were no monsters in the story, because the sound of Uncle Walter's voice was so deep and soothing.

"So, Agent Scully had a baby, but very soon after that, Agent Mulder had to go away, and Agent Scully was left on her own to look after the baby."

"What was he called?" I asked. "The baby? What was his name?" Uncle Walter took a deep breath.

"Oh, I think he was called William, don't you?" He told me, and I accepted that happily enough.

"But William was in great danger, and Agent Scully knew that if she kept him with her then her enemies would find him and hurt him." Walter paused, and wrapped his arm even more tightly around me. I looked up, anxiously.

"William wasn't hurt was he?"

"No – but only because Agent Scully decided to send him away to a safe place. A place so safe that Agent Scully didn't even know where he'd gone, because if she knew the bad people might have been able to find out where her baby was and hurt him."

I gazed up at Uncle Walter, with a frown.

"But wasn't Agent Scully unhappy without her baby?" I protested. "And with Agent Mulder gone away!"

"She was." Uncle Walter nodded. "She was desperately sad but she tried to be brave because she knew she'd done the best thing for her baby and that he was safe."

"And was he?" I pressed, concerned about the fate of my namesake.

"For awhile, yes," Walter said with a nod. "But meanwhile Agent Mulder got into some more trouble," he sighed, and I laughed because Agent Mulder was always getting into trouble in Uncle Walter's stories, and I was just a kid so that appealed to me. "And Agent Scully was forced to run away with him so that they would both be safe." He paused for a long time, until I had to nudge him in the ribs with my elbow to continue. He jolted, as if startled out of a dream – a sad one judging by the look in his eyes. "While she was on the run, Agent Scully found out something about her baby that scared her and made her worry about his safety. She loved her child very much, even though she couldn't be with him, so she tried to find him in order to protect him from the danger. She tried very hard to get to him, but she had too many enemies and she..." Uncle Walter paused, and, looking up, I was surprised to tears glistening in his eyes. "She lost her battle against them," Uncle Walter said, his voice choked. I put my hand over his to try and comfort him and had a vivid mental image of a lady with red hair and wise blue eyes before the memory was swallowed up by waves of grief and it was only then that I realised the truth.

"Agent Scully died?" I asked him, horrified and not a little angry that he'd ruined our storytelling ritual with this shock happening.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," he whispered.

"NO!" I said angrily. "I don't want her to die. Make her undead." He gazed sightlessly into space for a long time and then looked back at me.

"I can't, William," he said in a choked whisper. "She died."

"What did Agent Mulder do?" I asked in a small voice, scared by the expression in his eyes and still reeling from the unexpected turn the stories had taken. Agent Scully had faced down monsters and ghosts – she couldn't just die. It didn't seem right.

"Agent Mulder was very sad - and very angry," Uncle Walter informed me in a dull, distant tone. "He was so angry that he wanted to go and find the people who had done this to Agent Scully – but first...first he had to make sure her baby was protected. So, he went back to the FBI building where he used to work and spoke to an old friend and that friend agreed to go and find William, and protect him."

"Hmmm." I considered this for a moment. Up until now, Uncle Walter hadn't mentioned this "old friend" at the FBI and I wasn't sure I wanted to be introduced to a new character, especially not now my beloved Agent Scully had disappeared out of the stories. "Okay," I said finally, reluctantly. "What was the name of the old friend?"

Uncle Walter looked down on me with a tight, faded little smile. "His name was Assistant Director Walter Skinner," he said softly.

We stared at each other for a long time, and then, finally, I put my head against his shoulder and closed my eyes.

"I don't like this story so much," I murmured to him. "I don't want Agent Scully to be dead - and where's Agent Mulder gone?"

"Nobody knows," Uncle Walter told me, and there was a slight catch in his voice as he spoke. "Nobody knows. But there's one thing we do know."

"What's that?" I glanced up at him to find him looking down at me.

"That William is safe with Walter Skinner and that Walter Skinner would give his life to protect William," Uncle Walter said softly. I smiled and he dropped a kiss on my head and soon after that I fell asleep.

That long hot summer seemed to last forever. In reality, I think only about three months passed between Walter leaving the ranch, and the event that would rip my young life apart.

It was early September, and the leaves on the trees were just starting to turn. It remained unseasonably hot though – the air seemed to hang around us, sticky, sultry and stultifying, oppressing us with its stifling heat. I felt increasingly as if I was living in a fog, and sometimes I even found it hard to see. I didn't tell my mother, but there were days when I only managed to navigate my way around the house by my senses of smell and touch and my memory for where everything was. It was a peculiar kind of blindness – not rooted in any physical cause but in the heavy weight of the very air itself, obscuring my usually crystal clear sight and sinking me into a minor depression. I would spend every night curled up in my mother's lap as she rocked in the chair, her arms around me, protecting me from god knew what, and, during that last week, I lacked even the energy to visit Uncle Walter. I knew he waited for me as close to the ranch as he dared – he didn't like the idea of me walking through the woods to see him and when I would not stop visiting so late at night, he took to waiting down the lane at the end of the ranch instead. This was risky for him as if my parents had seen him I'm sure my father would have gotten his shotgun, but Walter worried about me. I didn't really understand why – I knew both my parents slept like logs and I was always very careful to be quiet when I slipped out of the house. I had a sense that went way beyond my years and I knew it was vitally important that my folks didn't know I'd been leaving the house to meet Walter. As it turned out, if Walter hadn't been waiting for me so close by, then it's very likely that I would never have lived to see my seventh birthday.

It happened on a Friday. The day had been as sticky and oppressive as ever. My mother tried to put me to bed but I clung to her, tangling my hands in her hair. She didn't understand what was wrong and neither did my father, who hovered anxiously by the door.

"Is the boy sick?" he asked, frowning.

"No...I don't know..." She whispered, an unspoken fear in her eyes. She had picked up on the atmosphere much more than he had I think.

"He's just going through a phase," my father said, shaking his head. "He'll sleep if you just leave him be."

My mother's eyes showed that she wasn't so sure, but she kissed me, stroked my hair, and left

the room. I stared after her as if to drink in the sight of her, with her long dark hair, un-braided, lying loose over her shoulder. I longed to get up and run after her but I was struck with what felt almost like paralysis. I knew then, that whatever was building up around us would have its release soon and I trembled in my little bed.

I lay there, utterly helpless, gazing at the shadows on the wall. After what seemed like an eternity, they started to move. I stared, transfixed, as they took on a sinister, almost demonic aspect – like every child's worst nightmare. The shadows made a faint, rustling, hissing sound as they crept towards me, and then they materialised in front of me and I found myself looking, not at a monster, but at a man. He was big, with broad shoulders, a grim, ruthless expression in his eyes and a knife in his hand. It took all my strength to be able to break through the oppressive atmosphere surrounding me, to pierce the paralysis that had engulfed me, and to shriek, at the top of my voice.

I wish I could be spared the memory of what happened next, but the crystal clarity of my senses didn't let me down on this occasion and I can still recall each sound, each smell, each vivid, bloody detail of it. One minute I was screaming, and the next my father had appeared at my bedroom door holding his shotgun. I saw his look of utter, incredulous horror as he saw the man looming over me, and the knife in his hand.

"Get away from him!" He yelled, but the intruder didn't even react – it was as if he hadn't heard. Instead, he lunged forward, his knife plunging towards my heart. I heard the sound of the shotgun like a booming, thunderous roar, accompanied by a bright, flashing arc of lightning, and the next moment I was spattered with a rain of red blood. I gasped, feeling it soak me through to the skin, but it barely stopped the intruder. He staggered, fell to his knees, rested there for a split second, and then got up again as if nothing had happened. In disbelief, my father fired again – and again, over and over again until the man's shirt was ripped to bloody shreds and finally, as one lashes out at an annoying mosquito, the stranger turned towards my father, took two strides to reach him, and, with the merest flick of his wrist, slit my father's throat. The stench of hot, sweet blood filled the room and I gazed in horror as my father fell to the floor, dead before he hit the ground. The stranger straightened up, turned, and began to walk back towards me, but before he was halfway to the bed, my mother appeared out of nowhere, and leapt on his back. I had always known my mother to be an anxious, timid type of woman, but now it was as if she was a lioness, protecting her cub. She yelled out loud, told me to run, and I scrambled out of the bed – but I couldn't get past them as they were blocking the doorway, and there was no way to escape. So I huddled in the corner of the room and watched as the intruder shook my mother from his back, turned on her, and then, almost casually, plunged his knife into her body. I heard the sound of a scream rending the air but it didn't emanate from her – it came from me. I screamed so loudly that I deafened myself but even as the sound pierced my consciousness I knew that I wasn't screaming out loud – my cry for help was non-verbal, entirely instinctual, and so powerful that it almost blinded me. I felt as if someone had hit me over the head with a heavy object – there was a ringing sound in my ears and my head hurt so much that I lay there, stunned, unable to move as the stranger turned back towards me once more.

I felt sure I was already dead. I was just waiting to feel the tip of that sharp, cold knife that glistened with my parent's blood. The man's face was cruel, cold, and intent and as I huddled there, in my corner, I knew, without any shadow of a doubt, that he wasn't human. He didn't resonate to the same tune as everything else on this world – and I knew that because I had been listening to that tune, studying it, revelling in it and enjoying it, from the day that I was

born. No, this creature standing in front of me with his bloody knife most definitely was not human – but he had been once. He was an abomination of a human being, ravaged by some kind of disease that turned his flesh into metal and his body into a ruthless automaton. He was out of sync with all the other living beings on this planet – whatever virus it was that had affected him had changed him into something completely other, something alien, something that didn't belong.

I gazed at him transfixed, and I think, maybe, that the fascination was mutual. Maybe he saw into my mind as I saw into his because he paused, and glared at me for a moment, as if he didn't understand what I could be. A split second later, something big and furious burst into the room, swung the alien being around, and sank his fist into the creature's jaw. The intruder swayed for a moment, slightly stunned, and then recovered, as he had from the gunshots.

"No, no, Uncle Walter, he'll kill you..." I sobbed, fearing I would lose the last person in the world left who I loved and who loved me, but Walter took no notice of me. Instead he swung again, and this time the alien blocked his punch and moved forward with his knife. Uncle Walter saw the knife glistening as it arced through the air and he grabbed the creature's arm, deflecting the blow. The alien grunted, and twisted Uncle Walter's arm where it was fastened on his wrist. Walter gave a growl of pure, savage outrage, his protective instincts every bit as finely honed as those of my parents but Walter was a warrior where they had just been simple farmers, and he got himself free, managing to wrest the knife from the alien in the process. He sank it into the creature's body where it did as much damage as my father's bullets had done. Realisation dawned in Walter's eyes and he fumbled for something in his pocket – too late! The creature fell on him, and they both went crashing to the ground. I heard the grunts of two big men landing hard, powerful punches on each other, and then I saw Walter finally reach whatever it was in his pocket. He took out what looked to me like a piece of rock, and, without warning, pressed it into the creature's eyes. The alien let out a roar, as if he had been blinded, this simple lump of rock hurting him far more than the bullets and knife had. He scratched at his eyes as if they burned him, and then fell, writhing, to the floor. He continued writhing, his skin going a strange shade of ashen grey.

Uncle Walter got up, breathing heavily. His jaw was bruised and his knuckles bleeding. He had a cut above one eye, and blood was dripping down his face. He gazed at me, and I gazed back, terrified.

"William. It's okay. It's me," he whispered, holding out a hand to me as if I were a stray cat. "It's okay," he said again, although it patently wasn't. "William, we have to leave. We have to go," he told me urgently, glancing at the still writhing form of the alien on the floor. I shook my head, and huddled into the corner even more, gazing over his shoulder into my mother's staring eyes. Already flies were alighting on her, feasting off her blood in the sticky, sultry, late summer heat. Uncle Walter looked back over his own shoulder to see what I was looking at and his jaw did that sideways clench. He turned back to me.

"William, she's dead," he said in a hoarse tone, full of raw sympathy. "I'm sorry, but they're both dead and you can't stay here any longer. You can't even stay here for another minute. We have to leave."

I shook my head again.

"William, I don't have enough magnetite to kill him – he'll recover eventually and even if he doesn't, you must understand that he was just the first," Walter hissed. "There will be others."

I stared at him in dumb horror. "I'm sorry, William, but we have to go," he said, coming towards me. I couldn't walk – all I could do was hold out my arms and he picked me up as if I weighed nothing, and then ran out of the room with me. My last sight of my bedroom was of a scene of utter devastation; the dead, bloodied bodies of my parents lying on the floor, and the alien, still writhing and scratching his face, his body looking even less human now, his movements strange, jerky and utterly unlike anything a human body was capable of. Walter didn't stop to gather any belongings – he just ran out of the house, and then tried to dump me on the ground outside.

"William, I need to set fire to the place – that'll slow him down while he's recovering from the magnetite," Walter told me urgently but I refused to be separated from him, so he worked with me stuck to his hip like a limpet.

He grabbed a can of gasoline from my father's stores, and threw it liberally over the house, concentrating on my bedroom, although I kept my eyes tightly closed as he poured the gas onto my dead parents' bodies. Then he lit a match and threw it onto the gas. The whole place exploded in flames, but he didn't stop to watch. He just hoisted me higher and closer, and began to run into the woods.

We ran for what seemed like miles. I have no idea how he managed to do it and to this day he tells me that he has no idea either – it was as if he found a superhuman strength from somewhere, just when he needed it.

"Where are we going?" I whimpered, clinging on to him for dear life.

"My car is just through here. I've always kept it nearby, ready...in case...in case something like this happened," Uncle Walter said grimly, his chest heaving from exertion.

He ran through the woods and out into the lane on the other side. There he stopped by a big, silver car, opened it, and got in, me still attached to him. He managed to disengage me enough to get me seated but I was still practically stuck to his flesh. I gazed at him as we drove away from the town, full of surprise. Uncle Walter was my father's hired hand, a man who worked for his food and lodging – he didn't fight like a professional boxer, or have mysterious lumps of lethal rock in his pocket - and he didn't own a big, shining silver car like this one we were driving in.

Uncle Walter glanced down at me, his face grim.

"William, are you okay?" He asked. "Did that man hurt you?"

"He wasn't a man," I replied, and Walter's eyes met mine and held my gaze for a long, assessing second.

"No," he replied after a pause. "No, he wasn't a man."

"How did you know he was there? How did you know to come?" I asked, knowing that I had not screamed out loud and even if I had, there was no way he would have been able to hear me from the lane. He shook his head.

"I thought you would be able to tell me that," he said grimly. "I suddenly got this blinding headache and I swear I could hear you screaming although..." He paused and his jaw clenched again. "Although only in my head," he finished.

"Yes, I screamed inside my head. I didn't know you could hear me," I murmured. Nobody had ever heard me inside their heads before; although I could often see into their minds, they seemed unable to see back into mine.

"You must have been frantic with terror," Walter said, and that was when I lost it. I had been in a daze since Walter had killed the alien, but now I fell apart. I started to tremble and the tears tumbled down my face. Walter pulled the car over, and then pulled me over so that I was sitting in his lap and he held me and rocked me as I sobbed piteously against his shirt for what felt like hours. Finally, I cried myself out – for now at least although there would be plenty more sobbing sessions in the coming weeks. He stroked my hair, kissed my forehead and held me and I clung onto him, knowing that he was the only person left in the world who loved me. Little did I know then, that there were many other people who loved me – people I had met when I was much younger and had all but forgotten - people who had risked their lives for me already.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't know this would happen. I'm so sorry. I thought maybe Scully was wrong. Please understand, William – I didn't have the power or authority to take you away from your parents and I didn't want to either – you were so happy there. I thought you might be safe – that ranch was in the middle of nowhere. I thought they might not find you, and that if they did there would still be time to get you out. I had no idea...we had no idea when we decided...Mulder didn't think anything would happen, not yet, not until you were older...we thought we had time...I was just supposed to be a precaution...those poor people. Your poor parents...oh god, I'm so sorry."

I didn't bear him any malice – only gratitude for saving me from that cold, strange, alien creature who had tried to kill me. However I did get an inkling of Walter's propensity to take everything on himself, and to shoulder more than his fair share of the blame. He couldn't have known what would happen – who could? I blamed nobody but the stranger who had taken my parents' lives and now he was dead so there was nobody left to blame – instead I had to find a way of living with my grief. Walter took out a huge handkerchief and wiped my face clear of my father's blood and my own tears, and then reached into his pack on the back seat and found one of his own enormous sweaters to wrap me in so that at least the blood on my pyjamas was covered up.

"Where are we going?" I whispered as Uncle Walter then wrapped me in a blanket he found in the back of the car, and belted me into my seat again.

"We're going to stay with some friends," he told me, with a little smile. "I'll take care of you, William, you know that, don't you? I'll always take care of you, while there's breath left in my body."

I stared at him – he seemed so strange and serious as he made that vow, and it reverberated

around the car, clanging in my consciousness in recognition that it was something utterly important. I can see him so clearly – dried blood on his face, and a dark cut on his brow, his face covered in sweat and grime, those brown eyes of his totally solemn.

"Yes, Uncle Walter," I whispered back. "I know." I may have doubted many things in my life, but I never once doubted that. Little did I know it back then, but the third phase of my childhood had begun.

Walter tidied his own appearance up as much as he could, wiping the blood off his hands and face and pulling another sweater over his blood stained shirt, and then he glanced over at me.

"William, we have a long drive ahead of us. I'm taking us to see some friends – people who will look after us."

"What about my parents?" I whimpered, tears flooding my eyes, as I remembered their dead bodies. Maybe some primal instinct within wanted the closure of knowing their bodies had been taken care of because I did know, rationally, that they were dead, but the child in me also hoped that somehow I'd wake up back in my bed tomorrow and none of this would have happened.

"They're dead, William. I'm sorry," Walter said, repeating what he'd already told me once. "We have to go – we can't stay in case that man comes after us. We're lucky that the ranch was so remote, and your folks didn't go into town much. That'll buy us some time before people find out what's happened up there and start looking for you. We have a long way to go and I'd like to get there before the police get involved. Try and get some sleep, okay?"

I nodded, uncertainly, sure that I wouldn't be able to sleep, but the smooth, gentle motion of Uncle Walter's expensive car soon lulled me to sleep. It was an uneasy sleep, and I woke frequently, with a start, only to remember what had happened and to long for the oblivion of sleep again. I was dimly aware of Uncle Walter making a couple of calls on his cell phone and I wondered how he could afford the phone and the car and all these worldly goods that had been beyond my parents' reach, dirt poor as they had been. I'm not sure how long we journeyed, but I remember vividly that he was anxious the entire time, looking in the mirror frequently, and not just to check on the other traffic. When day came, he hid the car and we slept, and then once night fell he began driving again, stopping only for long enough to refill with gas, and for us both to use the bathroom, and to grab some food en route. Just before dawn on the second night, I was roused by the sound of the car slowing down.

"Are we hiding again?" I asked.

He looked at me regretfully. "To be honest, William, I think we'll be spending the next few years hiding," he told me. "But for now, we can at least stop driving. We're here."

I had no idea where 'here' might be but on looking around I saw we were in the suburbs of a big city and I stared out of the window in amazement – I had never been in a city before, and everything looked strange and alien. There was a scent to it that I had never smelled before – full of so many overpowering odours that I almost fainted.

Walter drove the car onto a driveway, and a second later a man appeared at the front door. He silently opened the garage and Walter drove, just as silently, into it. The man outside then

closed the door softly behind us. It must have been about 4am – and our arrival was so quick and quiet that nobody in the street was aware of it save ourselves, and the people who lived in this house. Walter wrapped me tightly in my blanket, and hauled me out of the car. I clung to him again, scared of this strange new place. At that moment, a door at the back of the garage leading into the house opened, and a woman appeared, haloed in the bright white light of the hallway behind her. I took one look at her and fell in love with the next mother figure my short life had thus far given me. She had thick, wavy dark hair and clever dark eyes – but most of all, I knew that she and I shared a genuine empathy. There was a warmth to her that I felt immediately comfortable with, and, as with Uncle Walter, I knew that I could tell her everything about myself and she would believe it all – even those parts that confused me and had upset my parents.

"Hello, William," she said, in a voice that exuded comfort, love and sympathy. "My name is Monica."

"Hello, Monica," I whispered in reply. "You have really pretty hair."

She gave a little laugh of surprise, and then came towards me and kissed my cheek by way of welcome. I reached out a finger to touch her dark, wavy hair and she smiled down at me – and it was then that I saw the terrible knowledge in her eyes. She knew what had happened to my parents and she, like Uncle Walter, would do everything in her power to protect me from any more pain. I had no idea why this woman, who I didn't know, would love me enough to protect me – I just knew that she did.

"God, sir, you look terrible," she murmured, transferring her look of concern from me to Uncle Walter. I looked up, and couldn't help but agree with her. Walter's skin was grey and bruised, and there were dark shadows under his eyes. "Here – I'll take William," she said, reaching out for me. I gave a hoarse, inarticulate cry and grabbed Walter's neck even more firmly. Even though I knew instinctively that Monica was a friend, Walter was my security blanket and I wasn't about to give him up just yet. In fact, sometimes I wonder whether I've ever given up this particular security blanket.

"It's okay. I'll take him," Walter murmured, heaving me up a bit more in his arms and then walking, a little unsteadily, towards the open garage door. "And Monica – call me Walter. It's been a long time since anyone called me 'sir' and the truth is that I like it better that way."

"Yes, Walter, "I could hear the smile in her voice but I was distracted a second later as we stepped into the brightly lit hallway and someone else loomed into view. I buried my face in Walter's neck.

"It's okay, William – that's John Doggett," Walter told me softly. "He's a friend. A good friend." I nodded, but still didn't remove my face from Uncle Walter's neck. He took me into a living room and sat down heavily on a couch, with me still wrapped up around him. John Doggett said something and I sneaked a peek at him, interested by his voice. He had an accent I had never heard before and I loved the way he spoke – it fascinated me. He had such a husky, low voice, deep in a different way to Uncle Walter's rich baritone. I liked the raw, almost whispery quality of his voice and allowed it to wash over me. This man was a good person. I knew that immediately – just as I had known that Monica was a good person and Uncle Walter was a good person. I peeped out more openly from under my dark bangs, trying to get a better look at John Doggett. He was a thin man, with a firm jaw and almost opaque

blue eyes. He was standing behind Monica, one arm wrapped around her body, their hands entwined. I was struck immediately by their quiet, but almost tangible love for each other. She was so different to him - a creature of instinct, kind hearted, warm, open and almost serene. He was blunter, raw edged, honest, bluff and lacking the imagination that she had in abundance. He hid his own kind heart much deeper than she, but it was still there, under the surface. That was their attraction – to the inherent good they saw in each other. Their more superficial differences just added more spice to the mix but fundamentally they were a perfect match for each other. My parents were the only other couple I'd really known properly, and they had been well suited too. I recognised that same affection and underlying sense of love and attraction in John and Monica.

"What's the news?" Walter was asking urgently, as I gazed at my two new friends.

John and Monica exchanged a grim glance.

"Tell me," Walter urged.

"They found the bodies," John said, in a low, flat tone. "A few hours ago so you got a good head start."

"How many bodies?" Walter asked, his fingers going absently to stroke my hair.

"Just two," John replied. "They put an APB out on the boy. So far, they haven't mentioned you."

Walter's jaw did a sideways clench.

"After I left the ranch I went to the local feed and seed and made a big deal about having lost my job and getting out of town. I made sure everyone saw me, and then I hid out in the woods," he said. "I wanted Nathaniel to think I'd gone and I guess it worked."

"For now at least," John said, and there was something about his tone that suggested he thought it wouldn't be long before they tried to tie Walter to the murder of my parents.

"What did you eat when you were hiding in the woods?" Monica asked, in a fascinated tone.

"What I could find," Walter replied. "It was summer – there were plenty of berries and I haven't forgotten how to use a trap...and William was kind enough to often bring me food at night."

I glanced up at him, surprised; he had never told me he was hungry – my bringing him food had been instinctual, and now I was glad that I had. I was just starting to understand the depth of feeling these people all had for me – Uncle Walter had been sitting starving in a forest rather than leave my side.

"Well, that reminds me – you both must be hungry," Monica said. "I'll get you some food." She disappeared for a few minutes and I closed my eyes and listened to John and Walter's deep voices as they talked. I dozed off for a bit, and woke to hear them talking in whispers, clearly thinking I was asleep.

"I'm surprised," John said. "I didn't think he'd look like this somehow."

"I know what you mean," Walter replied in an undertone, stroking my hair. "I don't know what I was expecting but I kept looking for something of Scully in him...or even..." he hesitated, and then continued as if he hadn't started that train of thought. "...but I never saw it. It took me awhile to stop looking for other people in him and start seeing him as he is and not the sum of who made him. John..." Walter's voice went suddenly croaky. "John, this kid is something special – I mean **really** special. There are things he can do..."

"Well, I guess we knew that," Monica's voice chimed in softly as she returned to the room. "I mean, I saw him when he was just a few months old, doing stuff that completely freaked Dana out."

"I remember hearing about him making his mobile go haywire," John commented. "Is that the kind of stuff you're talkin' about, Walter?"

"No – I never saw him do anything like that, although I don't doubt he's capable of it," Walter murmured. "He just sees things in a completely unique way. It's as if his senses are more finely tuned than ours – everything you can see, he can see with a hundred times more depth and clarity, and it's the same with his hearing, his sense of touch, smell – all of it. He has a very good memory too – he remembers things in a way we don't – I can't describe it, but when he's remembering it's close to reliving the event."

"Poor child," Monica whispered in a horrified tone.

"I know." Walter rocked me back and forth on his knee, in a comforting motion. "We have to make sure that there are other things he can remember – good things – so he doesn't live Friday night over and over again. "

"You're sure about all this, Walter?" John asked, in an uncertain tone, and I sensed his underlying unease with this kind of subject matter.

"Yes, I'm sure," Walter said firmly.

"Sounds a little freaky, huh?" I could hear Monica touching John's shoulder and there was a slightly teasing note in her voice.

"Just...well, if all that's true then he's a pretty frightening kid," John replied.

"No – that's just it," Walter said. "I guess you have to get to know him, but I've never known a child that exuded this kind of...I'm not even sure what the word for it is – maybe innocence? He's got this incredible charm – it's hard to believe anyone could want to hurt him. It's sin enough to harm any child, but this one has something about him that makes it unthinkable. He's just...special. It's as if he isn't even here some of the time – he's seeing things we don't. He has this unworldly air..." Walter stopped short and I sensed the sudden rise of tension in the room.

"Well, there's a lot we don't know about him," Monica said. "It's possible..."

"No. He's Scully's kid," John said firmly, as if he refused to entertain any other notion. "Scully and Mulder. He's their son."

I felt a thrill run through my body. Scully and Mulder – I had idolised them from afar because of Uncle Walter's stories and now they were saying that the two agents were my parents? A couple of nights ago I had lost the only parents I had known, but now I had gained some new ones and that made me feel strangely comforted. I stirred, and Walter looked down on me with a smile.

"Hey, William. Monica made us some sandwiches. Want to eat?" I nodded, slowly, suddenly feeling very hungry. Walter and I made short work of the sandwiches and then Monica suggested that we both needed a bath. I clung to Walter as he got up, and walked slowly, wearily, up the stairs with me. I had never thought about how old Walter was – he was just an adult, like all other adults, but now I saw the fine lines around his eyes, and realised that he was older than my parents, older than Monica and John, and however strong he was, the events of the past few days had completely exhausted him – emotionally as well as physically. Monica ran a bath, while Uncle Walter sat on the closed toilet seat and began slowly undressing me. He looked fit to drop but I wouldn't let anyone but him touch me, and I cowered against Walter's legs when John offered to help.

"It's okay. He just needs some time," Walter said, but I saw the momentary flash of hurt in John's eyes and wondered what that was about. Unbidden, a picture of another little boy, a few years older than me came into my mind but I pushed it away, too tired to think about it.

Monica and Walter bathed me, and then wrapped me in a big warm towel to dry. Monica gently tousled my hair and smiled down at me.

"Hey, so this is what you look like underneath all that dirt," she said with a wink, and I gazed at myself solemnly in the mirror. I was very pale, and my eyes seemed to shine in my head, like huge, luminous, dark orbs. My eyes had always been a strange colour – they seemed to change with my emotions, going from brown to green to blue, but right now they were as black as the night. Apart from my eyes, I was a very ordinary looking child - I wondered if that was what John had meant when he'd said earlier that I wasn't what he'd expected. "I bought these yesterday – I hope they're your size," Monica said, holding up a pair of pyjamas. They were a little too big but it felt good to get into something clean, and then Uncle Walter picked me up again and took me to a room with a little camp bed in one corner and a double bed in the other. He put me in the little bed, and I stiffened and clung to him, unwilling to let him go.

"It's okay. You're safe here," Walter told me, gently but firmly disengaging himself. I moaned and shook my head – I had thought that I was safe back in my bedroom on the ranch but I hadn't been. "I'll stay right here until you fall asleep, then Monica will watch you while I take a bath myself, and I'll come back and sleep in that bed over there. You won't ever be alone," Walter told me.

"Does Monica have any of that magnet rock?" I asked Walter in a quavering voice. He glanced up at Monica and she nodded.

"Sure I do," she said, coming over and drawing a small pebble out of her pocket. "We all carry some, William. Here, why don't you have my piece so you can feel safe?" She put out

her hand and placed the piece of rock in mine, and I yelled and it dropped to the floor.

"That hurts," I said, and she exchanged a worried glance with Walter. Transfixed, I reached down and picked up the rock again. It **did** hurt – not in the same way as it had clearly hurt the alien who had attacked me, but it tingled in the palm of my hand, and gave a burning sensation. When I let the rock fall onto the pillow and examined my hand, it was a little red where the rock had touched me.

"I'll sleep with it under my pillow," I told her. "It'll be safe there."

She and Walter glanced at each other again, worried frowns creasing their foreheads, but they nodded, and I pushed the little lump of rock under my pillow and then laid my head down. Uncle Walter pushed my hair out of my face, and sat there with me until I closed my eyes and fell fast asleep.

It was the middle of the afternoon when I woke the next day. John Doggett was sitting on the bed in the other corner of the room, reading a newspaper. He looked up, sensing my eyes upon him, and smiled. I liked the way the sunlight caught those pale blue eyes of his and I smiled back – and then my smile faded as the memories crowded back in, and I felt tears spring into my eyes.

"I thought maybe it was a dream," I whispered, and he shook his head.

"I'm sorry, William," he replied, getting up and coming to crouch beside me. I turned my face away from him.

"Want Uncle Walter," I sobbed.

"Walter's having somethin' to eat," John told me in a firm tone. "The poor guy's completely beat – so why don't you and I see if we can't get you into some clothes and downstairs for breakfast, huh?"

I felt John's hand on my shoulder and shook him away, my sobbing rising a decibel. The hand came back, more firmly this time.

"Hey, buddy – Walter isn't your only friend," he told me. "Monica and me – we're your friends too." I saw that boy again – he had spiky hair, like John's, and a wickedly mischievous smile. I liked him. I saw him gazing up at John, laughing as they played some prank on the boy's mother. If this boy with the wicked smile had loved John so much, then I thought that maybe he might be worth loving. I turned, and stared at John thoughtfully.

"Luke was 9 when he went away, wasn't he?" I asked. John took a sharp intake of breath. "He had cool hair just like yours but his eyes were brown like Barbara's." Unsettled by the freaked out look on his face I added, in a bright tone: "I think you should help me get into some clothes and take me downstairs for breakfast now." I was parroting back his earlier words in what I hoped was a reassuring tone. He gazed at me for a moment, and then nodded, still looking slightly stunned. I got out of bed, and he pointed to a red sweater, pair of jeans and underwear that someone – Monica? – had laid out on the dresser.

"Luke had a bike," I told him as he helped me out of my pyjamas and held up my sweater for me to dive my head into. "Will you teach me how to ride a bike without training wheels, John?" I asked him as my head emerged the other side.

"Sure, buddy." He gave a little smile, but I saw that I had inadvertently touched something deep inside him, something he would never speak about. I hoped he didn't mind me talking about Luke.

Walter was sitting downstairs sipping some coffee when I walked into the room holding John's hand. He looked a lot better than he had – he was clean, shaven, and was wearing a pair of clean jeans and a plain dark shirt. His skin had lost its greyish tone but the eye under his cut forehead was turning a nasty multi-hued colour, his jaw looked red and sore, and his fists were swollen and cut. I threw my arms around him and kissed him, then sat next to him to eat, guzzling a huge bowlful of Cap'n Crunch as I listened to the adults talk.

"Walter, we've been making some arrangements over the past six months in case something like this happened," Monica said, tousling my hair as she passed and winking at me as she poured me some orange juice. "You clearly can't stay here, so we've found a cabin up in the Blue Ridge. It's very remote – and very small. We bought it in an assumed name so nobody can trace it to us."

"Sounds good. When do we leave?" Walter asked.

"Tonight," Monica nodded at John. "I'll be coming with you," she added quietly. "I'm handing in my resignation at the Bureau."

"What?" Walter looked up sharply, his dark eyes concerned.

"Walter, it's okay – the Bureau isn't important. We have other work to do now. Vital

work." She glanced over Walter's shoulder at where I was sitting, busily stuffing my face and humming to myself at the same time. "John will stay here – and at the Bureau. We need someone on the inside to find out what's going on – someone who we can trust," Monica finished.

"And there ain't a lot of people we can trust left in the Bureau," John added with a sigh. "I'm sorry to tell you this, Walter, but after you went...well the place gets stranger by the day. I'm not saying I understand this, but the people just feel – different. People I used to work with just blank me as if I didn't exist – almost as if they've forgotten we were ever friends."

"It creeps me out just going into work these days," Monica said. "John can handle the weirdness better than I can. Sometimes I'm talking to people and I get a chill that just crawls up my spine. I'll be glad to leave. I don't belong there any more."

Walter was listening to all this with a grim, dour look on his face and I knew it hurt him in some way I didn't understand.

"You guys will need to lie low," John said. "Walter – I don't want you or William leaving the cabin if you can avoid it for the next few weeks. Things are pretty sensitive out there and the police are looking for William. Monica can get the groceries or I'll bring them over but you

can't rely on my visits – if they start watching me then there's no way I'm going to lead them straight to you."

"We'll need to set up code words, and devise a means of reaching each other – we can't assume that if John calls on his cell phone that it's really..." Monica paused, "...really John," she finished. "He has to give us the right password or we get out and start moving on."

"I agree." Walter nodded. "I think we have to assume that they still want William, for whatever reason – and our job is to protect him." Monica looked at Walter and then at me, with a startled expression. "It's okay – I won't lie to William or hide the truth from him," Walter told her firmly, putting his big arm around my small, skinny shoulder. "William, I told you once that you didn't have as much time as I'd like in which to grow up and that's still true. After Friday, you understand as much as any of us what kind of danger lurks out there for you. I don't want you to go around being scared but I do need you to be careful. Just know that we - Monica, John and I – we'll give our lives to protect you."

"But I don't want anyone else to die," I whispered, thinking how my mother and father had both sacrificed their lives to protect me.

"Then we'll do our best to stay alive," Monica told me, with a wide smile. Uncle Walter was right – I did have to be aware of the dangers, and it was reassuring to know that there were people who would protect me, but even so, I was just a little boy, and I found it hard to comprehend what was happening in my young life.

"What about...?" Walter glanced at Monica and his jaw did that familiar sideways clench. "Have you heard from him?" He asked and I saw a light of such hope in his eyes that it almost hurt to see it extinguished a split second later by the regretful shake of her head.

"I'm sorry, Walter, but no," she sighed. I didn't know who they were talking about but I did know that he was someone that Walter wanted to hear from very much, judging by the dejected slump of his shoulders and the aura of disappointment that emanated from him so vividly as to be almost tangible. I also realised, without surprise, that Monica and John were more or less oblivious to it and only I could see it.

Monica had bought both Walter and me some clothes, which were already packed and stowed in the car in the garage. Later that night, Walter laid down flat on the back seat, with me lying flat on his large chest, a blanket covering both of us, and Monica drove the car out of the garage. John took off in his own car at the same time but in the opposite direction, as a "decoy" he said, and I spent a long time muttering the word over and over in an undertone because I liked the sound of it – although it didn't sound as good in my tinny voice as it had in John's husky baritone.

"Uncle Walter," I piped up, lying there on his chest as if it was the most normal thing in the world to be ferried about in the middle of the night hidden from sight under a blanket. "What does 'decoy' mean?"

"Uh, William, it might be best if you kept real quiet right now," Uncle Walter whispered back. "I promise I'll tell you when we get to where we're going. Okay?" I nodded happily, put my head down on his chest, and promptly fell fast asleep.

Okay, so I'm pretty sure that Walter kept all his **important** promises to me but some of the minor ones may have slipped his mind; I ended up having to ask Monica the meaning of the word a day or so later.

We arrived at the small cabin in the middle of nowhere some time after midnight. There was no hot water – just a spring fed cistern and an old hand pump by the sink. Nor was there any electricity but I didn't care much about that because there was a creek nearby which afforded me hours of endless fun in the coming few weeks, from the sheer pleasure of listening to the sound of the running water, to the physical joy of getting in it and feeling that water washing over me. I liked the place immediately – I was used to wide open spaces, and I was too small to care much about the privations of the place. There was very little furniture – Monica and John had managed to discreetly stock the place, but it was all pretty basic – an old, rickety table and chairs, sleeping bags, air mattresses, and a lurching cupboard was the extent of it, but it was safe, and that was all that mattered in the circumstances. I had the feeling we wouldn't be there for very long anyhow.

As soon as we arrived, Monica and Walter unpacked while I sat on the back porch and gazed at the depth of the colours that made up the pitch black night sky. Monica shot me the occasional worried glance, but it had been awhile since I had last been able to gaze, unhindered, and fully connect with the world around me. Somehow I needed it in order to be able to re-charge my batteries and it soothed me after all I'd been through. Walter let me sit there while they sorted out the house as best they could. It was decided that Monica would sleep in the little back room, while Walter and I would sleep on air mattresses in the living room. When they had finished getting the car unpacked, Walter lifted me up, uncomplaining, in his big arms, helped me into my sleeping bag on one of the mattresses, and watched over me until I fell fast asleep. In fact, there were very few occasions over the next few years when he didn't watch over me until I fell asleep – maybe he knew that those moments were the hardest, and the time when I was most likely to think about my dead parents.

I woke with the sun the next morning. It was a beautiful day and I enjoyed myself helping Monica and Walter to get the cabin into some degree of habitability. Monica revealed a surprising degree of capability for home-making. I say surprising, because she was a very different woman from my mother, who liked nothing more than to be busy around the house. Monica was a woman of other talents completely, but underneath her imaginative, quirky exterior was someone who liked things to be organised, and it was this talent that she put to good use in the cabin. The place wasn't filthy, but it had been awhile since she and John had last been out to check on it, so it needed some work. She smiled as we got on with it, scrubbing the table and floors together – with me probably more of a hindrance than a help now I look back on it.

"I did this once before," she murmured, tousling my hair. "When your mother was expecting you. We had to hide in a place like this then."

"Why?" I asked. "Were there always people chasing after me, even before I was born?"

Monica considered this for a moment, and then nodded, a sad frown creasing her forehead. "Yes, William," she sighed. "I'm afraid there were. You're a very special little boy, you see."

I nodded, happy enough with that answer. I had always known I was different so none of this surprised me, however out of the realm of most children's experiences it was.

"Tell me about my mother," I asked, softly. Monica stopped what she was doing and brushed a long strand of dark hair away from her face, studying me uncertainly. "Please," I ventured, reaching out a hand to touch her arm. I immediately had a vision of a small, red haired woman, with fierce, intelligent blue eyes. "Agent Scully," I whispered, recognising her immediately. I remembered her now, from when I was very small. It was harder to access those memories but now I had seen Monica's memory of her it all came flooding back. I had spent so long in her arms, nuzzling against that red hair. I could remember the smell of it – like fresh apples.

"Your mother was a brave, dedicated woman," Monica told me. "And most of all, she loved you very much. She loved you enough to give you up when you were in danger. She never rejected you, William. She thought she was saving you."

I nodded, but I couldn't stay to help Monica any more. Instead I went and sat on the porch, staring into space, going through these new memories that had been awakened one by one, treasuring the little time I'd had with the woman who had been my first mother.

Walter was busy collecting and chopping firewood for the little wood stove. They'd brought enough kerosene to keep a couple of lamps burning and they had a big battery lamp that lit the place well enough at nights, as well as several large flashlights. I still pestered Walter for stories about Agent Mulder and Agent Scully but now I had Monica to pester as well and she wasn't a bad story-teller either – she even knew some stories about Agent Scully that Uncle Walter didn't know. We spent many evenings toasting marshmallows in the woodstove, with those two adults telling me stories until I finally fell asleep.

Book Two: Father by Xanthe

I needed those brief weeks of calm and comfort - my world would explode again all too soon but for those weeks I had a chance to rest and recover, at least as much as I ever would, from that terrible night when I had seen my adoptive parents' murders. I spent a lot of time studying a single blade of grass, or the leaves of a tree, or the shape of Uncle Walter's big, blunt fingertips as he sat on the porch step behind me, his arms loosely wrapped around my chest. He was a constant, reassuring presence, and as the world's familiar cadences soothed away the worst of the memories, he was always there to remind me that I hadn't lost everything. I still had nightmares, still saw my parents' dead bodies as clearly as if they were right in front of me, but the abject terror of the experience did begin to fade.

John Doggett showed up one Friday night a few weekends later. He brought food, more blankets and - much to my delight - a bicycle.

"Well the kid has to have something to keep him occupied," he muttered to Monica and Walter in a somewhat defensive tone. "Sheesh - locked up out here with only you two for company. And, with all due respect, you don't have any experience of kids, either of you."

Monica exchanged a wry smile with Walter and they didn't say another word on the subject of the bike. I went to bed that evening with a big grin painted on my face, and soon fell sound asleep. I woke a few hours later - it was dark outside, but I could hear something in the small room. I could see Walter's sleeping face a few yards away, just poking out of the blanket he was wrapped in, but there was no sign of John so it didn't take me long to figure he was sleeping with Monica in the other room. I let my mind wander to the gentle, whispering sounds that emanated from that room. They were tuneful, soft and loving, like the fluttering of butterfly wings. I followed my mind's path into the room, and found myself watching John and Monica as they performed what looked, to me, like a profoundly beautiful dance. They were both naked, and he was kissing her with incredible tenderness. She was sighing and running her fingers gently up and down his back. They danced like this for what seemed like ages, moving in perfect time to each other, and as they touched and kissed a light seemed to emanate from their bodies, surging, pulsing and glowing. At first there were two distinct lights - Monica's a dark, vivid orange and John's a deep, strong green, but as the dance became more intense, the colours seemed to merge into a multi-hued rainbow that fascinated me. I had watched my parents do this dance and had always found it profoundly moving but John and Monica's dance was different, their colours deeper, and they had a choreography all of their own. I felt a surge of pure love for them and at that moment Monica stopped dancing, and gazed at the darkness above the door, where I was floating.

"What is it?" John asked.

"Nothing...I thought...oh...I see." Monica gave me a smile that glowed with energy, and then continued with the dance as if nothing had happened. I wasn't sure if she had seen me but I knew that if she had then she didn't mind me being a silent witness to their loving.

I didn't return to my body - I was too energised. Instead I floated back into the living room and gazed at Uncle Walter for awhile. He was dreaming of running and fighting and hiding, and always in his dream he had one arm around me, protecting me, while with the other he tried to hang on to the shadowy, elusive image of a man whose features I could not make out. I whispered something soothing to him that emerged from my ethereal body in a cloud of

pure white light, then left him to his dreams and wafted out into the yard. I journeyed slowly down to the creek; it was a profoundly different experience to visit these places and see these people whilst not in my own body. I couldn't feel the moonlight bathing my skin, or the wind in my hair, but all my senses were heightened and I could feel emotions more intensely, and see a depth of colour and vision that was far beyond the ability of my eyes to appreciate. I love these moments outside my body for that reason if nothing else - but in addition to that there's a grace and freedom to the sensation that it's impossible to experience whilst in a body.

I sensed John and Monica's dance reaching a beautiful climax that left them both happy, sleepy and joined, felt Walter's dream fade into something less tense, and a bird by the creek raised a sleepy head and looked straight through me with a puzzled expression, as if he had been expecting to see someone.

I wandered off to explore my surroundings further than Uncle Walter had allowed me to do in my body. It was like stretching after a long time being cramped in one place and I roamed, unfettered, for what seemed like an eternity. I soared and arced in the sky like a bird, and then swooped down low, so that I was just above the tips of the grass. I was having such a good time that I almost vanished straight back into my body from the shock of coming across the man.

He was striding along the dirt path that led to the cabin. In my heightened, bodiless state I could see that he radiated an aura of tense anger and sadness, gripped by the kind of grief that eats into a man's soul and makes him bitter from the inside out. I remembered my adoptive father once referring to one of our neighbours as being "pursued by demons" and that phrase came back to me. If anyone was pursued by demons it was this man here. I could almost see them, dark shadows clinging to his back, taunting and tormenting him with their constant cacophony of sound, beating and driving him forward, so that each step he took had a desperation that bordered almost on madness.

Worried, I realised that this man, this dangerous man, was making his way to our cabin. At least I knew he was human - but I was fairly sure that humans could be just as dangerous as aliens. So, I slipped speedily and effortlessly back to my body, coming to with a jolt. I scrambled out from my sleeping bag, went over to Uncle Walter, and patted his face with my hands to wake him.

"Uncle Walter." He came to and sat up, reaching for his spectacles.

"William - are you okay? Are you hurt?" He asked anxiously, hooking the glasses over his ears and grabbing my arms to examine me.

"I'm fine but I thought you should know there's a strange man coming," I whispered.

"A man?" Walter frowned, and I could feel that his mind was still foggy with sleep. "How did you...?" He shook himself awake, realising that in some way he already knew the answer to that question. "Okay, William. What direction is he coming from?" He asked, getting up and reaching for the gun beside his bed.

"He's coming up the path from the lane," I said, reaching out with my mind. "He's got such darkness with him, Uncle Walter. He's bringing darkness here. It's sitting on his shoulder like a crow."

"Okay." Walter looked somewhat freaked out by this description but he grasped his gun firmly in his hand, and glanced towards the little room. "William, I want you to go very quietly into the other room and wake John and Monica. Tell them what you told me. I'm going to go to the door and..."

"It's too late," I whispered. "He's nearly here."

"Stay down - out of sight," Uncle Walter hissed, and then he moved surprisingly quickly towards the front door, his bare feet making no sound as he slid into place behind it, his gun raised, ready.

I think we both almost jumped out of our skins when there was a knock on the door a split second later - perhaps we had been expecting the man to just kick it down. Walter unlocked the door, then put his hand on the door knob, wrenched it open, and pulled the stranger into the cabin in one swift motion. He threw the man down over the table, one arm pressed up his back, and placed his gun to the back of the man's head just as John and Monica stumbled into the room, awakened by the commotion.

"Hey, Walter, it's me," a dry, almost toneless voice said from the direction of the table.

Uncle Walter released the stranger quickly, as if stung, and pulled him to his feet.

"Christ, what the hell are you doing sneaking around in the middle of the night?" he roared, the first time I had ever heard him raise his voice to anyone, the strain of the past few minutes sounding in his hoarse voice.

"Nice to see you too," the stranger said in a pointed tone. He rearranged the collar of his coat and then gave Uncle Walter a tight smile. "Nice to see that you haven't lost your endearing habit of restraining me over tables either," he commented.

Walter threw down his gun onto the table, a look of profound irritation distorting his strong features, combined with something so complex that I couldn't decipher it. Monica stepped forward, fastening an old robe around her slender body.

"I think we need some light," she said.

John gave a grunt, and, without saying a word to the newcomer, disappeared back into the little room to pull some clothing on over his boxer shorts, which were all that he had been wearing when he burst into the living room.

A couple of flashlights relieved the gloom of the room and I was finally able to see the man I had only glimpsed in shadow thus far. The demons that drove him weren't anywhere near as visible but I could still catch glimpses of them, and there was something about the raw, hungry light of his eyes that hinted at some great tragedy whose weight he still lived under - maybe more than one. Even when he was still, this man exuded an unceasing restlessness that made me tired to watch him. Most of all, I could not help but feel an intense wave of

sympathy for someone who lived in the shadow of a darkness that seemed to have ravaged his very soul. It was impossible not to feel his pain and to want, somehow, to be able to heal it. The danger I sensed was still real, but I saw it was not directed at me but towards himself. Yes he was dangerous, but in the same way a moth is dangerous as it flies into the flame - wild, uncontrolled, but hurting only itself, seemingly oblivious to its own pain as it repeatedly flings itself towards its own wanton destruction.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, strangely, because it was what came to my mind to say. The man's eyes alighted on me for the first time and I almost shrank from his gaze. His hazel eyes bored into me, searching for something and finding nothing.

"So, you're William," he said, in those same dull, almost ironic monotones.

"Yes. Who are you?" I asked.

"William, this is your father," Monica said, which maybe wasn't the wisest way of introducing the man, and it certainly made Walter hiss with disapproval, but Monica had an endearing tendency to speak first and think later. She flushed. "I mean...that is..." she glanced at the stranger, with an agonised expression on her face. I suddenly realised that this gaunt stranger in front of us was the same man I had glimpsed occasionally in Walter's memories - especially when he was telling me stories about Agent Mulder and Agent Scully.

"It's okay, Monica. I know who he is," I said with a smile of recognition. "He's Agent Mulder."

The man smiled back at me and I caught a glimpse of the famous Mulder charm that I had learned about from Uncle Walter's stories. At first I had wondered if this tall, gaunt, possessed and dispossessed man could be the witty, charismatic Agent Mulder of the stories - I even wondered if Uncle Walter had got it wrong, and misrepresented the man, but when he smiled I knew that the charm was still there, still capable of blinding and bewitching. This was a complex man, and while I enjoyed his charm, I did not entirely trust it.

"Agent Mulder," he mused. "It's been a long time since anyone called me that. I just go by the name Mulder these days, William."

And still those eyes of his searched and searched me, and, even though he was not touching me, I caught a sudden flash of memory from him. He was looking for red hair, blue eyes, the shake of a head, or something in my stance that would remind him of Agent Scully - and, on a subtler, almost subconscious level, he was looking for a large nose, dark hair, hazel eyes - something about me that would remind him of himself. He found neither and his disappointment was almost tangible - and disappointment was an emotion he was all too familiar with - I could see it etched in his face.

"I don't look the way people want me to look," I told him softly. "I'm sorry about that, Agent Mulder."

"Just Mulder, please," he said, giving me an assessing look. He wasn't surprised that I had guessed he was looking for some trace of my parentage in my features - in fact, I didn't think very much about the world surprised Mulder at all. He seemed to have an understanding of its mysteries that most people didn't grasp. I realised, with a shocked thrill of recognition, that he

caught glimpses of the way I saw the world - and he was the first person I'd met who did that. It made my heart ache to see how that knowledge had set him apart from everyone else, and I caught the sharp angles of his mind, glimpsed something of the diamond sharp brilliance of it, that made me also understand how he had come to be this brittle, this damaged by his experiences. I knew, even then, that that would never happen to me. I could see the whole, while he was tormented always by what lurked in the half-light, just beyond his field of vision. I could see how frustrating it must have been for him to see glimpses but never the entire picture but that wasn't all that had damaged this man - there was much else besides.

We looked at each other for a long time, and nobody else in the room said a word. It was as if there was a connection being formed, a bond being made, strange, fragile, and uncomfortable though it was, lacking the warmth or easiness of the bond I had with Uncle Walter or even with John and Monica. Finally Mulder tore his eyes away from me. They alighted instead on Uncle Walter and I gave a little gasp of shock as a thin, bright white light passed between them as the two men gazed at each other properly for the first time. Nobody else seemed to have seen the light, but it crackled with a heat and intensity that I could physically feel and then it was gone. I studied the two men more closely, wanting to understand what had just taken place between them but they were glowering at each other like mortal enemies and not the good friends that I had assumed them to be. Walter seemed to catch my unease because he suddenly looked my way.

"Hey, William, you look worn out. Come here," he said, holding out his arms to me. I ran to him eagerly and he sat down at the table and pulled me onto his knee. I rested my head against his shoulder and closed my eyes. "You're tired, huh?" He said, rocking me gently and I nodded and nestled against him. It had been a busy night - for a start I had spent the best part of it roaming around outside, and then there had been the shock of Mulder's arrival, to say nothing of the continued strain of his brooding, unhappy presence, causing tension in the previously much more serene and relaxed atmosphere. I was glad to close my eyes and drift off into the comfort of Uncle Walter's warm arms. I let my mind wander, and even though my eyes were closed, I could still see everything that went on in the room as if they were open. My body relaxed and my breathing deepened, and I guess the adults all thought I was asleep because that would explain what Mulder said next.

"So, I see from the news that you've been a busy boy, John."

A frown of annoyance appeared on John's forehead and he glanced at Walter with a grimace.

"Damn it, Mulder, I haven't told them about that yet," John snapped, in an undertone, angry but trying not to wake me.

"Told us about what?" Walter said grimly, hugging me closer. I mumbled something, to make it sound as if I was still asleep - I was becoming very adept at eavesdropping and I'm afraid it's a vice that I still possess. Maybe it was born into me by the very nature of my special abilities. All the same, I'm somewhat ashamed to recount what a little actor I became in my attempts to overhear conversations that weren't meant for my ears.

"They found the bodies of a boy and a man in the woods near the burnt out Granger house. Both had their faces shot away but the boy was wearing blood stained pyjamas with Nathaniel Granger's blood on it," Mulder said bluntly. "So they called off the manhunt for Walter and the missing boy."

"So they **were** looking for me?" Walter asked, a grim look on his face.

"Yes - but they're not now, thanks to John here I presume." Mulder gave John a searching look and the other man's hands balled into fists. I wished I understood Mulder's abrasiveness - he seemed to carry tension around with him wherever he went and didn't think anything of spreading it around either. Walter glanced at me, a worried frown on his face but I remained unmoving, seemingly asleep.

"The man clearly wasn't you - they assumed he was a drifter who killed the Granger family and then turned the gun on himself for reasons they didn't understand," Mulder said, in a softer tone. "The case is closed. The police aren't looking for either you or the boy any more, Walter, although obviously plenty of other people are still looking for William."

"John?" Walter turned to gaze at John who had a grim, but oddly determined look in his eyes.

"Somethin' had to be done, Walter. The last thing we needed was the police getting William - they wouldn't be able to protect him from..." He trailed off and shrugged. "It wasn't easy, but it had to be done. I didn't like your name getting' mixed up in this either, not after all you'd done to save William's life but - who was going to believe stories about super soldiers and aliens, huh? I took William's pyjamas, and..." John trailed off. "There are ways and means y'know," he muttered. "Those folks I used were already dead. I didn't like doing it but..."

Monica put a comforting hand on John's arm.

"Y'know, a few years ago I ripped into my old partner from the NYPD for planting evidence," John said with a sigh. "He felt the ends justified the means, and I told him he was wrong. Now, I figure there's more at stake than my principles. I mean, we're talking about the fate of the whole goddamn planet here if I understand this correctly, huh?" He looked from Monica to Walter to Mulder and then, pointedly, to me.

"Yes, John," Monica said softly. "We are talking about a whole planet and you did the right thing. You bought us some time."

"Supposing they do an DNA test on the boy's body..." Walter began.

"They won't - they don't have anything to test it against," John replied. "There are no DNA samples for William and of course he was adopted so he won't match the Grangers. They could go knocking on Mulder's door asking for a DNA sample, but all he has to do is deny he's William's father and..." He stopped sharply in mid-sentence looking very much as if he could kick himself. A savage look passed over Mulder's face and he gave a shrug.

"Oh shit. I'm sorry, Mulder," John said with a sigh.

"That's okay, John. I don't know the truth about William's parentage any more than you do. Scully wanted to believe he was mine but..." He shrugged. "Hell, Scully wanted to believe he was hers, let alone mine. She was scared of the truth."

I listened to all this with interest, wondering what all the talk about my parentage meant. I had been thrilled by the glamour of being told I was Agent Scully and Agent Mulder's son,

but now that I had met Agent Mulder, I was quickly revising my ideas about glamour. He simply wasn't a glamorous man. He wasn't the smart, shiny suited, quick-witted man of so many of Uncle Walter's stories. With my eyes tightly closed, I examined Agent Mulder at my leisure. I could see him in a different way to how I would view him optically - I could see more of the man underneath, more of the soul shining through the skin. Mulder had a gaunt face, with a couple of days' growth of beard stubbling his chin. His eyes seemed to be set in shadow, haunted, and full of grief, pain, and something worse, something that ate him away inside - something I identified, without understanding it, as guilt. He had once been handsome - still was somewhere underneath - but he clearly didn't care about his looks now, if he ever had. His hair was thick and dark, with the faintest flicker of silver at the temples. He was wearing a pair of old jeans and a torn, stained sweater and looked as if he hadn't eaten a good meal in weeks. He was talking in those low, drawling tones, and I savoured the sound of his voice, so different to Walter's rich, low tones and John's husky, heavily accented voice. I loved the sounds they made as they all talked, with Monica's lilting, higher voice, adding her own music to the mix.

Although Mulder said he was fine with John's comment, his mood changed abruptly from that moment in the conversation. I could feel the tension emanating from him. He was like a finely tuned violin - one wrong note had upset his balance and was still echoing and reverberating around his psyche.

"This whole thing's a mess," he commented sourly. "Christ, Walter, why didn't you get William out of there earlier? Isn't it bad enough that we have the super soldiers chasing after us, let alone the police? How long can we be expected to hide him from the whole goddamn world?"

I felt Uncle Walter stiffen.

"And wouldn't the police have been after him - after us both - if I'd removed him from the ranch while his adoptive parents were still alive?" he growled. "Besides which, I doubt I could - William loved that place, Mulder, and I wouldn't have been able to persuade him to leave."

"He's 6 years old!" Mulder snapped.

"Are you saying I should have forcibly abducted him against his will?" There was a tone of deadly fury in Walter's voice that Mulder completely missed - or else he saw the warning signs and chose to ignore them.

"He's just a kid - he doesn't know what's best for him. He doesn't have a clue who we're dealing with!"

"He knows a lot more than you think but you wouldn't understand that because you haven't spent more than a couple of days in his company in his entire life," Walter said, and I could feel the heaviness in his chest. "What is he to you, Mulder? A commodity? Or a human being?"

"We have no evidence that he's that," Mulder said, in a tight, deadly whisper. "We don't know what he is."

"He's your son!" Walter exploded.

There was a tight, deadly silence in the room.

"There's no evidence that I'm human either if it comes to that," Mulder said, his tone a fraction lighter but not light enough that anybody could tell whether he was joking or not. "Well, I've had unauthorised brain surgery, been able to read people's thoughts, and I've returned from the dead. Not your average, everyday human experiences."

"Last time we all met, you said the boy wasn't in any danger yet. We decided, all of us, that it would be safer for one of us to go and watch over him. I volunteered for that. I was happy to do it, especially after what happened to Dana. We expected to hear from you if there was any reason to be concerned over William's safety," Walter said tightly. "Christ, how did you even know we were here? How did you find us?"

"I called John - told him not to tell you. I had no idea whether I'd be able to get here or not and I didn't want anyone to expect me," Mulder snapped.

"And where have you been for the past year and a bit, Mulder? Would it have hurt to have made the occasional phone call?" The wounded tone in Walter's voice told me that this was personal.

"I was trying to find out what we're dealing with, trying to figure out a time scale for all this."

"Were you? Or were you just running away?" Walter snapped back, the fury in both men becoming almost palpable. I could see John and Monica just standing by, watching as the heat in the room grew. John opened his mouth to say something but Monica, understanding the nature of the tension better than he, put a warning hand on his arm and shook her head.

"Running away? From what?"

"From Scully's death, from William - from yourself," Walter threw at the gaunt stranger sitting at the table. Mulder's eyes flashed - his equivalent of Walter's famous jaw clench.

"Don't go there, Walter, or I swear I'll..." Mulder's fists clenched, and he got up angrily. Walter couldn't move - he had me on his lap, but I felt sure that if I hadn't been there he would have got up as well, and the tension would have escalated accordingly. I didn't like seeing these two men who I was so intimately connected to at each other's throats and stirred, shifting the mood with a yawn and a stretch.

"Uncle Walter - I'd like to go to bed now," I said, in a small voice.

There was silence as Walter and Mulder glared at each other, their emotions running high. Then Walter's jaw did a familiar sideways clench and, with some effort, he pushed his anger to one side in order to take care of me.

"Of course you do, buddy," he said, standing up with me in his arms. "It's late and it's been one hell of a night."

John and Monica went into the small galley kitchen and began crashing around making sandwiches, while Walter helped me into my sleeping bag and settled me back down on my mattress. Mulder stood where he had risen, still glowering at the place at the table where Walter had been sitting.

"Why is Mulder so mad at you?" I whispered to Uncle Walter as he bent to kiss me good night. He sighed, and ran a weary hand over his face.

"He isn't, William. Not really. He's mad at himself mainly," Walter replied, and I understood what he meant. I was about to tell him about Mulder's demons and then remembered that Walter didn't know about my nocturnal wanderings so instead I nodded and closed my eyes.

I slept for awhile, and woke several hours later to find someone staring down at me. I shifted, and, keeping my eyes closed, peeked a look - only to find Mulder's gaunt, shadowed frame standing above me. He was gazing at me intently, but what surprised me was the look of tenderness on those strained features of his. He didn't touch me, just stared at me. Looking around the room, I could see Uncle Walter huddled in his sleeping bag, and another bundle of bedding as far away from Walter as was possible in the small room. I was startled to hear a wrenching sob and looked back at Mulder. His entire body was shaking, his arms wrapped tightly around his torso, and tears were rolling down his cheeks. He tried hard to control his emotions and after that first sob made no sound. He cried for several long minutes and I wondered whether to get up and say something but there was something so private and savage about his grief that I dared not. Finally the tears stopped. He stared at me for a long time, and then, with a sigh, turned...but instead of going to his blankets, he went to where Uncle Walter was sleeping and looked at him instead. My breath caught in my throat as I watched him - the expression on his tear stained face had changed, totally, and he looked down on Uncle Walter with an expression of such affection that I would never have believed possible from the tense, angry man I had witnessed earlier. He crouched, silently, by Walter, and reached out with his hand - but stopped half way there. Walter remained asleep, and Mulder stroked the air softly above his head, as if in his mind he was stroking Uncle Walter's scalp. It was a bizarrely tender and touching gesture and I felt tears of my own prickle in my eyes. After several minutes, Mulder got up and returned to his blankets. He gazed down on them with considerable distaste, and then gazed back at Uncle Walter. He did this several times, and then, with a sigh, he picked up the blankets, and walked with them over to where Walter lay. He settled down on the air mattress carefully beside Uncle Walter, not quite touching, and lay there stiffly. Walter muttered something in his sleep and rolled over a little way. His outstretched arm came to rest on Mulder's thigh as if it belonged there. Mulder nestled in and closed his eyes, and, for the first time since he had made his dramatic entrance, he looked relaxed. His face was different in repose - younger, more at peace, and I caught a glimpse of the man he had once been. I wondered what Uncle Walter would say when he woke to find that Mulder had crept so close during the night, and then saw, with my intuition rather than with my eyes, that Uncle Walter wasn't asleep. He was pretending - I didn't know why, but I think it had something to do with not frightening Mulder away or embarrassing him for needing the comfort and warmth of another human being right now.

The adults spent a lot of the following day talking about things I wasn't particularly interested in and didn't understand. I wandered outside and that was when I saw the boy. He was about 9 years old and was sitting on bottom step of the porch, carving into a piece of wood with his fingernails.

"Hi," I said, recognising him immediately.

"Hi." He looked at me with mischievous brown eyes.

"You're Luke - John's son," I commented.

"Yeah." He glanced over my shoulder into the house, straining to catch a glimpse of his father.

"He can't see you," I told him.

"I know that. You can though," he said.

"Yes." I shrugged.

"How come?" He squinted at me as I came to sit next to him on the step.

"I dunno." I shrugged.

"Oh. You want to play?" He asked.

"Sure." I grinned, and he grinned back. I liked Luke - he was simple, uncomplicated and friendly, much like his father. We chased each other and climbed a couple of trees, although he was three years older than me and much better at it than I was. John came out later in the day with the bike he'd brought, and Luke grinned up at his father, completely delighted that John was my friend and doing the same kind of stuff with me that he had once done with Luke.

"Time to see if we can teach you to ride without those training wheels!" John called. "A boy your age should be riding without 'em."

"I know!" I said excitedly. "Dad was going to teach me but he never had the time and Mom was always too worried about me falling over and she wouldn't let Dad take them off until he had time to teach me."

John smiled down at me throughout this garbled speech, and I climbed onto the bike, which felt strange without the training wheels holding me up. John held onto the back to keep me steady as I sat down.

"Now, just ride along and get used to the feel of the bike. I'll hold on behind so don't worry," John told me. I saw Monica and Walter sitting on the back porch, watching us, and waved to them excitedly, almost toppling over as a result. "Hold on, William! It's too soon to be impressing Monica by takin' your hands off the handlebars," John chided and I laughed. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mulder emerge from the shadows of the cabin. He leaned against the wall, a dark, intense, critical presence, watching me. I felt nervous in front of him, in a way that I hadn't when it had just been my previous audience of Monica and Walter.

"That's it, just keep on pedalling," John was saying and I tore my thoughts away from Mulder and concentrated instead on the bike. Luke was standing a few feet away, clapping his hands and doing a little dance as I got the feel of the bike. "I'm going to be holding you the entire

time," John said, "so just pedal away."

Encouraged by the fact he was keeping the bike steady from behind, I concentrated hard. The bike picked up speed and I felt a wave of exhilaration rise inside. I knew I could do this! Maybe, by the end of the day, I'd even be able to ride without John holding the bike upright from behind. I shouted this out to him over my shoulder but there was no reply save Luke's high-pitched giggle.

"He let go ages back, doofus!" Luke called. "You've been doing it all by yourself." I was so startled by his comment that I wobbled, and came to an ungainly halt - only to find that Luke was right - John was standing back by the house and I'd pedalled most of the way by myself. John was grinning broadly, and my audience on the porch clapped and cheered me. I felt an absurd wave of giddy pleasure and was delighted to see that even Mulder had broken into a smile, even if he didn't clap.

"You cheated, John! You cheated!" I laughed, beginning to pedal again, overjoyed with the achievement.

"That's what every dad does when he's teachin' his kid to ride a bike," John replied. "It's what I did with Luke," and his grin faded a little, but not completely. Over on the porch, I sensed Mulder's mercurial mood shifting again, and felt his emotions surge...jealousy - Mulder was jealous? Uncle Walter got up, and spoke to him in a low undertone, meant for Mulder alone - but my super efficient senses picked up the words.

"If you want to be his father, you have to spend some time with him," he said.

"Looks like he's doing well enough for fathers between you and John," Mulder replied. "I'd just move in there and screw him up in the 101 unique ways Mulder dads have for making their kids really miserable. He's better off without me. You're a hundred times the father I'd ever be anyway. You understand him, and he adores you. I've seen the way he looks at you."

Walter began to say something and then gave up with a sigh of total exasperation. I turned back to my bike, and began pedalling furiously around the yard. I was so pleased with myself that I got over-confident, went too fast, and wobbled to an ungainly halt in the dirt.

"You okay, William?" Monica called but I waved her off. I was fine save for a skinned knee - and I was more interested in the girl who was laughing at me from under a nearby tree. I'd never seen her before but I knew exactly who she was.

"It's not nice to laugh when someone hurts themselves," I told her, crossly.

"I know," she giggled, "but it was funny." She put a hand over her mouth but I could see she was still giggling. She was about 14 years old with long black braids and flashing dark eyes.

"Who's she?" Luke asked suspiciously, running up to examine my bike for scuff marks.

"She's Samantha," I replied with a wave of my hand.

"Why's she here?" Luke frowned. He had been used to having me all to himself and he wasn't sure he trusted this newcomer.

"Probably because of Mulder," I told him. "She's his sister so I guess that kind of makes her my aunt."

She stuck her tongue out at me in horror at this suggestion and Luke and I both laughed. I climbed back on the bike and pedalled straight at her and she ran off, laughing, with Luke chasing after her, yelling and waving his hands around. We played for a couple of hours - I liked both my companions enormously. Samantha had a wise, big sisterly air, and frequently told us we were being stupid, and behaving like kids, but when I cut my knee again, out of sight of the adults, she was the one who knelt down beside me, and wiped the grit out, and wrapped it in her handkerchief. I cried a little, because it hurt and I was only 6 years old, and it was then that I saw the little girl. She was sitting on a log, and she looked very scared.

"Hey, it's okay," I said softly, not wanting to frighten her away. She looked around, her big eyes afraid, as if she hadn't expected me to be able to see her. "Why don't you come over here?" I asked, holding out my hand to her. Samantha finished tying the bandage on my knee, and Luke was busy trailing a twig through the dirt, making smiley faces on the ground.

"She's just a kid," Luke said scornfully. "She can't play with us."

"She can if she wants," I said, still holding out my hand. The little girl wasn't more than 3 years old and she was very shy. "Hey, come on," I said, with my friendliest smile, and finally she took a couple of timid steps towards me and then stood, right in front of me, twisting her hair between her fingers. I reached out, pulled her gently into my arms, and kissed her soft hair, loving the scent of her baby breath. She settled into my lap and snuggled up and it felt so good to hold her.

"What's she called?" Samantha asked, crouching beside us and holding out a finger to the child as if greeting a strange cat.

"Do you want to tell them?" I asked the little girl, squeezing her slightly but she shook her head and looked around with big, shy eyes. "Do you want me to tell them then?" I asked and she nodded, vigorously. "Her name is Emily," I told my friends. "And she's my sister."

"Why's she here?" Luke asked, clearly a bit put out by this influx of girls into our previously boy's only club. I frowned.

"I'm not sure. I think maybe she just wanted to say hello. I've seen her before but she always ran away before I got a chance to talk to her." Emily was adorable. Shy, with the biggest eyes and the sweetest personality - it was impossible not to fall totally in love with her. She didn't speak but she understood everything we said and although she would only let me pick her up at first, by the end of the day she did allow Samantha to kiss her plump cheeks, and tidy her mussed up hair.

Walter called me in for supper as the sun was going down. I went, wearily, and bade my friends goodbye as we approached the porch.

"Can't we come in?" Samantha asked, with a little pout.

"You can but I can't talk to you - it'll freak them out. And if you make me laugh they'll think I'm nuts," I told her. Her face dropped, and I saw her looking over my shoulder into the other

room, trying to catch a glimpse of Agent Mulder. "I could give him a message if you want?" I said, then wished I hadn't as the idea of going up to the tense, volatile Agent Mulder and telling him I had a message from his sister was a truly scary one. She screwed up her face.

"It's hard to think of anything," she sighed. "I've wanted to say things to him for years and years but now I have the chance - nothing seems important enough. I mean last time I was able to talk to him we argued about what to watch on TV. " She sighed again and looked very sad. Emily put her pudgy little hand into Samantha's and the teenager smiled down at the little girl. "Tell him...tell him that he shouldn't feel guilty for what happened to me," Samantha said, flushing furiously. "It wasn't his fault. He was just a kid. I wish he'd let me go sooner - he'd have had a happier life."

"Ookay," I said uncertainly, not entirely sure whether I'd be able to work this piece of advice into the conversation. I was, however, pretty sure that Agent Mulder wouldn't be able to follow his sister's advice - guilt was ingrained into him, and he nursed it to him. Even as a 12 year old boy, he had taken all responsibility for his sister's abduction and one message from her wasn't going to change that - that was just the way he was.

I turned and ran up the stairs into the cabin, to be met by a delicious smell so I guessed that Walter was cooking tonight - he was far and away the best cook among the adults, which was one of those surprising facts about him.

As we ate, the adults talked. A lot of it went over my head but I liked listening to their conversation. I was preoccupied anyway because Luke had thought it would be a good idea to follow me into the cabin with the sole intention of making me laugh. At least, that was what he told the others but I knew that he couldn't resist any opportunity to be with his father and I was soon proved right as he abandoned his lame attempt to pull silly faces at me, and went instead to sit by his father's knee, gazing at John with adoring eyes. Samantha was more hesitant around Mulder, and I guessed how strange it must be for her to be so close to this gaunt, tense man, when she remembered the bright, lively 12 year old boy he had once been. She sat a little way away, cuddling Emily on her knee for support - Emily was much more relaxed now, and she seemed to guess that Samantha needed her for comfort, so she let her pick her up quite happily, and contented herself playing with Samantha's long dark braids, and occasionally she shot me shy glances with those big eyes of hers, and I couldn't help but smile in return.

"What else have you found out this past year, Mulder?" Walter asked. Mulder chewed hard, swallowed, took a deep gulp of water, and nodded.

"Nothing good," he said. John and Monica exchanged glances. "People are disappearing, Walter - or maybe disappearing is the wrong word. They're still there, they still exist, but they aren't people any more."

"I've seen that!" I piped up. All the adults in the room swung their heads around and looked at me in surprise. I flushed and buried my face in my dinner.

"William," Walter said softly. "What have you noticed? You can tell us."

"People aren't the same." I shrugged. "There was a lady in the town, Mrs. Rooney, and one day she got sick and when she was better she wasn't Mrs. Rooney any more. She looked like

her but it wasn't her. She was the first one I noticed but there were others."

"You can see whether someone is human or not?" Mulder asked, leaning forward. It was the first time he'd really spoken to me since his arrival.

"Yeah," I shrugged. "That man who came to kill me - he wasn't human but he was different than Mrs. Rooney. She was..." I hesitated. "She was one of them. Other. But he had metal inside him. He was made to be the way he was and he was kind of empty inside. Mrs. Rooney wasn't like that - she was very complicated inside." I had an image of a tentacle recoiling quickly, and a hissing sound as I remembered Mrs. Rooney and I shuddered.

"That ties in with what I've found," Mulder said, nodding vigorously. "There are aliens and there are super soldiers. There aren't many aliens but they're very powerful. Super soldiers on the other hand are mutated humans - they've been exposed to a virus that turns them into what they are. They were created to be a slave race for the aliens, to do their bidding. In any one town you're likely to find a single alien, controlling an entire pack of super soldiers."

"Mulder, are you sure about this?" John said and I could see that he was finding it hard to believe it all.

"Yes," Mulder said flatly. "In those areas where there aren't enough aliens to control the super soldiers they tend to go renegade. Some just go renegade anyway - they aren't human, but they remember being human enough not to want to be slaves."

"Those people who came and watched Scully giving birth to William..." Monica said slowly.

"Super soldiers," Mulder nodded. He glanced at me and a frown flickered across his forehead. "They view William as some kind of saviour - they think he's going to save them from their slavery. The ones who came to witness his birth were those who weren't under the immediate control of their alien masters, and there were probably even some who managed to break out from that control because they were influenced just by being near William. It would be a mistake to view them as friends or accept their offers of help though - they want their freedom, yes, but they aren't human, and if they're being controlled by one of the walk-ins then they're highly dangerous killing machines."

"Is this why the aliens want to kill William?" Walter asked, one big hand coming to rest protectively on my shoulder. "Because the super soldiers view him as some kind of saviour?"

"Yes," Mulder replied bluntly. "It isn't just the super soldiers either. There's some kind of prophecy written on spaceships buried around the planet, and they foretell of a saviour who will deliver all the people of the world from a great danger from the skies."

"Wait a minute," Monica frowned. "Why would the alien spaceships foretell of a saviour that would deliver **us** from **them**."

"The spaceships aren't theirs," Mulder said.

"What?" Monica gasped. Walter's jaw had dropped while John was looking deeply sceptical of what Mulder was saying.

"The spaceships were built by our own ancestors during their last battle with these aliens," Mulder said calmly. "When the aliens arrived, there was a massive battle which our people won. The aliens slunk away, but it was always their intention to return. Our ancestors knew that - they also knew that we'd forget about the danger over time, so they set up a warning system. 50 years ago, when an alien reconnaissance ship crash-landed at Roswell, that warning system was activated. Since then, the old space ships have been re-emerging all over the world, and fragments of them are everywhere."

"What use are these fragments?" John asked, in a sceptical voice.

"They're imprinted to respond to people with a certain kind of DNA - people who are genetically more likely to be psychics, or mystics, or prophets, or whatever you want to call them. That's how the prophecy about William became known but there are others. In addition..." Mulder sighed and shook his head. "There have been other signs. One of the oldest prophecies tells of a time when our blood will become contaminated, and abominations will walk the earth. Strange, inexplicable things will happen that people won't be able to understand. Those are the warning signs of the coming invasion, caused by the first, early ships of the aliens arriving in our solar system, carrying an old and deadly pathogen with them that causes mutations in our genes."

"Oh shit," Monica said. "The X Files..."

"Yes." Mulder nodded. "It isn't a coincidence that the number of X Files has increased exponentially during the past 15 years - it's all part of the of build up to colonisation..."

"...which will take place in 2012," Walter finished.

Mulder nodded. "According to the ancient Mayan calendar and the prophecies, yes."

"Forgive me for saying so, but this all sounds like so much 'the end of the world is nigh' crap," John cut in forcefully. Luke gave a delighted little giggle and clapped his hands and I had to smile at him.

"You've seen enough to make you believe, surely, John," Monica said, placing her hand on his arm.

"I believe some of it - I believe, god help me, that this planet is under threat although I'm not entirely sure what from, but now you're askin' me to believe in prophecies and ancestors who had spaceships and a whole load else besides." He shook his head.

"Where did you think these prophecies came from if not from our ancestors?" Mulder asked him. "They were a race of prophets, John - but it's a talent that has survived in only a very few of our race. They could see the future, and they left warnings for us about what would happen - but it's up to us to listen to those warnings. If we don't, then we'll all end up either dead, or serving alien masters. Nothing is foretold beyond the possibilities - we could still end up losing everything."

"So what the hell happened to all that technology?" John demanded. "If we could build spaceships back then, why ain't I livin' on the moon today? What happened?"

Mulder frowned. "I think that the last battle our ancestors had with the aliens was apocalyptic - it may even have resulted in their almost complete annihilation. It's possible that it changed the map of the world, caused tectonic plate subsidence, climatic change - almost destroyed the planet. Every culture on this planet has a race memory of a great flood - maybe that was the aftermath of that battle with the aliens. I think we survived by the skin of our teeth; we were shunted right back into the stone ages, and it's taken us a long time to re-emerge."

"And William - is he really the saviour the prophecies speak about?" Monica asked, gazing at me with her warm brown eyes. Mulder chewed on his lip for a moment, and then shrugged.

"Plenty of people seem to think so," he said at last.

"Well, assuming of course that all this is true," Walter gestured with his head in John's direction. "Our priority has to be to keep William safe."

"I'd agree with that much," John said.

"Me too," Monica smiled at me.

"At least until 2012, when whatever happens will happen." Mulder shrugged again. "We have only one really valuable weapon, besides William himself, and that's magnetite."

"Hold on a minute," Walter said, raising his hand. "You're viewing William as a weapon? He's just a child."

"An unusual child, as you'd be the first to admit," Mulder said.

"He has certain gifts, sure, but..."

"We don't know who he is, or where he came from," Mulder said cautiously. I gazed at him steadily and those hazel eyes of his gazed back at me.

"He's 6 years old for god's sake! You'll scare him talking like that in front of him!" Walter protested.

"Six going on six thousand," Mulder commented. "Have you told Walter all the things you can do, William, or have you been hiding some of them?"

I gave a start of recognition - he could see the things I never spoke about, the way I could often see those things in other people.

"I didn't want to scare anybody," I replied in answer to his question. The truth was that ever since my parents had died it was as if something had been unlocked in my brain and I had been finding that I could do new things every day. "I didn't think of it as hiding exactly," I said with a frown.

"What kind of things, William?" Walter urged softly. "What new things are you learning?"

"It's not that I'm learning new things," I said slowly, hesitantly, my - admittedly advanced - six year old's vocabulary struggling to keep up with my understanding, which far exceeded

anything I could put into words. "It's more like finding things I always knew I could do and then doing them."

"So there's a good deal more you can do than Walter knows about? You've been keeping that secret from him, huh?" Mulder pressed.

"Christ, Mulder, he's just a kid, don't bully him," Walter snapped.

"I'm not. I just want to find the truth," Mulder flared back in response. I could see Monica wince and she reached for John's hand and held it tightly, clearly resigned to another huge row sparking between these two men.

"It's always the goddamn truth with you, isn't it? Just how many things are you intending to sacrifice on the altar of that truth, Mulder?" Walter growled. "Is William just one more thing?"

"No. Fuck you, Skinner!" Mulder shouted, getting up, his volatile temper out of control.

"Then treat him like a son, and not a suspect to be interrogated!" Walter said in a low, dark tone. "Scully's dead, Mulder, and all the guilt in the world won't bring her back, but her son is still here, and he still needs you."

"This is not about my fucking guilt!" Mulder yelled.

"Yes it is. You think you failed Scully, the same way you think that you failed your mom and dad and your sister, but you didn't. There are some people you couldn't save, Mulder, but they're gone, and William is still here. You can still save him if you stop treating him as if he's just a part of the jigsaw and start treating him like a son."

Mulder's hazel eyes were flashing furiously and I could see Samantha standing just behind him, stroking his arm, trying desperately to soothe some of the tension out of him, but he was, of course, oblivious to her. Something Walter had said about Mulder's guilt finally sank into my bemused brain and I found myself opening my mouth to speak.

"You shouldn't feel guilty about Samantha, Mulder," I told him. "She hates that."

The room went silent and then all the adults in the room turned to gaze at me again. I bit on my lip. "She told me to tell you," I whispered. "She said you were just a kid and she wished you'd let go of her sooner because you'd have had a happier life. She said to say it wasn't your fault and she really means it." Behind him, Samantha's dark brown eyes were luminous.

"Thank you," she said softly, still stroking Mulder's arm.

"You can talk to her?" Mulder said, his breathing coming in harsh gasps.

"Yes - she's here right now," I whispered, hating this. I remembered the reactions of my parents to this kind of event all too well and that was why I had fallen into the habit of hiding my experiences and abilities from adults.

"She's here?" Mulder swallowed hard. "Where?" He asked.

"Just behind you - to the side. She keeps stroking your arm," I replied. "She's upset because you're so upset."

Mulder went very still, as if he was trying to concentrate, and then, suddenly, an incredulous look appeared on his face.

"I can feel something," he whispered. The other adults all glanced at each other, unsure what was happening.

"William," Monica said suddenly. "Who else is in the room with us - who else that we can't see?"

"Lots of people, Monica," I told her. "There's Luke. He's playing around on the floor next to where John's sitting. Sometimes he laughs when John says something he likes. He liked it when John showed me how to ride the bike earlier."

John's eyes were dark as he struggled with this, and he looked around the floor as if he hoped to see Luke. Luke just stood there, a bit bewildered by what was happening.

"And Emily's over there with Samantha," I continued. "She doesn't say anything. I don't think she can. Something was done to her before she was born and she was never like other little girls. She's pretty though, and really sweet."

"Is Samantha saying anything else?" Mulder asked, and I could see from the expression in his eyes that he desperately wanted to believe.

"No, she's just standing beside you," I whispered. "She's about 14 years old and has long dark hair in braids and very dark eyes. She laughed at me when I fell off my bike but later she tied my knee with her handkerchief when I cut it."

"Show me," Mulder said, in a strangled tone, and, looking down, I wondered if he would be able to see the makeshift bandage or not. He shouldn't have been able to, but sometimes objects could cross over. I undid the handkerchief and held it out to him, and he took it, an utterly incredulous look on his face. It was then that I realised that everyone in the room could see the handkerchief.

"It has an 'S' embroidered in all the corners," Mulder whispered. "Mom gave Samantha these the Christmas before she disappeared. I remember them because Mom made a real fuss about Samantha being a proper lady and carrying a delicate handkerchief around in her purse."

"What the hell is going on here?" John asked, in that defensive tone he adopted whenever he felt his personal boundaries being pushed too far. "Since when did William turn into the kid from that *Sixth Sense* movie? Seeing dead people..." John made a disapproving noise in the back of his throat, and shook his head.

"John, just leave it for now," Monica said, placating him with one of those warm, open smiles of hers that always seemed to stop him dead in his tracks. "Maybe now isn't the best time to get into this. William looks beat to me - why don't we put him to bed and we can talk about this some more in the morning - when it's daylight outside and not so spooky in here." She treated all of us to that charismatic smile of hers and the mood in the room began to calm

down, although Mulder and Uncle Walter were still looking at each other antagonistically. I could feel myself shaking as I witnessed that white light flashing between them again. What was it? It scared me because I didn't understand it. I needed these two men to be friends, but they had spent most of the time they had been together arguing furiously and it was starting to upset me. It was wrong - the emotions in the room were out of sync, and there were so many different complex undercurrents that I was getting a headache. I'm not surprised Monica noticed how pale I had become.

I wrapped my arms around Uncle Walter's waist and he kissed me good night, but I didn't dare approach Mulder who was clutching that handkerchief and looking as if his body wasn't strong enough to contain all the emotions inside it. I longed to go up to him and kiss him goodnight too, the way I could so easily with Walter, Monica and John, but he turned to stare at me as I walked past him and there was so much turmoil in those hazel eyes, so much volatility emanating from him, that it overwhelmed me, and I scurried past him towards my sleeping bag instead.

"The boy just wants you to like him," I heard Uncle Walter say, wearily, as I scuttled away with Monica.

"Why wouldn't I like him?" Mulder snapped back.

"Mulder, you don't even know him. Please don't keep him at arm's length. He's a difficult kid not to love when you get to know him - or maybe you can't face the thought of loving anyone again," Walter commented in a mild tone.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mulder growled, immediately antagonistic again.

I sighed as Monica settled me down into my sleeping bag.

"Why are they always arguing?" I asked her. "I wish it would stop."

"I know. It's getting on my nerves too," she confided. "They've always been like this - although it got a lot worse after Dana died. There isn't a thing in the world they wouldn't do for each other, but when they're not fighting side by side they're fighting each other like this."

"Don't they like each other?" I asked.

"No, that isn't it," she murmured, glancing back over her shoulder. "That isn't it at all. The problem is that they like each other too much."

"Oh," I said, a glimmering of understanding dawning. These were complicated, adult emotions, but my senses were becoming more finely tuned to pick up all the nuances of human behaviour as each day passed.

I settled down in my sleeping bag but I couldn't sleep. I could hear the low murmur of voices as Mulder and Uncle Walter continued arguing about whatever it was they were arguing about this time. There was a cadence to their argument, their voices full of a hurt that had nothing to do with whatever they were arguing about and which told of a much deeper conflict - one they never spoke about out loud. The discord went on for some time, Mulder's drawling monotone at odds with Walter's deep, mellifluous, tones. The atmosphere around

me began to prickle with their energy and I suddenly realised they were dancing - it was a similar dance to that which I had witnessed Monica and John performing the previous night; it certainly came from the same root, but this dance was jagged and ugly, and it set my nerves on edge. I couldn't help but tune into their voices and listen to what was going on.

"I'd just like to know that you're not going to take off again without saying a word to anyone. You can't operate alone any more, Mulder. You're part of a team now. I know that isn't your strong suit but..."

"I worked with Scully for years. I know how to work as part of a team," Mulder interrupted.

"You ditched her and kept her out of the loop whenever you wanted to follow something on your own or if you wanted to do something she knew she'd disapprove of. I read the reports, Mulder. I signed the damn things!"

"Oh listen to yourself, Skinner, still going on about the rules as if we were working at the goddamn Bureau. Well wake up, Assistant Director, because there are no fucking rules out here. We're on our own and we make the rules up as we go along."

"Well, perhaps one of those rules could be that information is shared in the group and that we keep in regular contact with each other."

"Or what? You assign me to tape surveillance? I need the space to work on my own - I work better that way. Other people just slow me down."

"Did Scully know you thought that?"

There was a tense silence, and then a raw, jagged intake of breath, followed by a deadly, hissed: "Fuck you, Walter."

"No! Fuck you both!" Monica's voice broke into the argument, utterly exasperated. "Or better still, why don't you fuck each other because that's what all this is about. The sooner you two go to bed together, the sooner all this stupid bickering can come to an end."

There was a shocked silence, broken finally by John's chuckle.

"Well, I guess she told you. It ain't anythin' that we haven't been thinking, although your timing is probably off as usual, Monica."

"I need some air," Walter said. There was a sound of a scraping chair and then I heard him walk out into the night. Mulder was silent, and I had no idea what was going on in his head.

"Oh shit," Monica sighed. "I'm sorry, Mulder. That didn't come out the way it should have."

"It's an interesting world view you have there, Monica," Mulder said in a tight-lipped kind of voice. "I'll be out on the porch." Another chair scraped and then he was gone.

"You gotta stop me next time I open my mouth and put my big foot in it," Monica said to John and he laughed and I could hear him pull her into his arms and deliver a big kiss to her lips.

"Well at least you stopped all their goddamn arguing," John told her when he released her. "I'm sure as hell grateful for that. I just hope William didn't hear what you said."

"William would probably understand it better than any of us," Monica muttered darkly. "He may be a little kid, but he's got a good handle on human emotions - and his own understanding of the physical expression of them. He watched us when we were making love last night, John."

"What? You're kidding," John gave a long, low whistle. "Are you tellin' me he was standin' in the doorway?"

"No. He was hovering over the doorway," Monica replied. "But don't worry, John. I don't expect you to believe me!"

"Thank you for that, Monica." They kissed each other again, and their voices became lower, vibrating with affection and punctuated by little kisses. After a little while, Monica tore herself away.

"Well, I guess I ought to check that William is okay after all that," she whispered.

A few seconds later she appeared by my side and I sat up, eagerly.

"I should have known you'd still be awake," she chided, sitting down beside me, and giving me a cuddle. "How much of that did you hear?"

"All of it," I admitted.

"Hmm, this eavesdropping is starting to become a habit with you. How much of what you heard did you understand?" She asked, those warm dark eyes of hers alight with mischief.

"Most of it," I admitted. "I'm sorry I spied on you last night, Monica. It's just your dance was so beautiful."

"Dance?" She frowned and then smiled. "Oh, that's how it looked to you?"

"Yes." I frowned back at her. "Isn't that how it was to you?" I thought of all those merging colours and auras and the gentle love of their dance.

"It's a lovely word for it." She kissed my hair affectionately.

"Everything dances," I told her in an undertone. "Even the spiders have their own dance, and the rats - and the trees and the birds and the flowers. It's part of the pattern that makes up the world. I like it. I..." I hesitated, unsure how to tell her this. "I won't ever be part of that kind of dance," I confided, and she pushed me away to get a better look at me.

"Sure you will, William. One day you'll meet a nice girl - or boy - and..." she began.

"No." I silenced her with a whisper. "It's not something I can be part of."

"Are you telling me you won't live to be an adult, William?" She asked, horrified.

"No, I'm not saying that. I don't know the answer to that. I just know that if I do...I'll never want to do that dance. That's just part of being me."

My understanding of myself was increasing as each second went by. I felt as if my parents' violent deaths had kick-started something inside me, like unlocking a door to a room full of treasure, and now I found things in that room on an almost hourly basis.

"You can't know something like that at your age," Monica said, trying, I think, to offer comfort, but I didn't need comfort. I loved that the world was connected by this beautiful dance, but I didn't need to be part of it - I was part of the world in so many other beautiful ways that most humans never experienced, that I didn't feel I was lacking anything by missing out on this. And, in a way, being an outsider to it just made me appreciate the beauty of it even more. I felt so much a part of the leaves on the trees, the soil, the sky, the sun, the moon, and every living being on this planet that knowing I would never dance that dance seemed a small price to pay.

"Uncle Walter and Mulder want to dance don't they?" I whispered. "I understand that now. Why don't they, Monica?"

She sighed. "It's a long and complicated story, William. Mulder and Walter have been in love for a very long time."

"Do they know that?" I asked.

"On some level - yes - but they keep fighting it and that comes out as all this bickering they do. They can't leave each other alone, and although they won't admit what's really underneath all that fighting, they know, deep down, I think."

"Why can't they admit it?" I asked, confused.

"I'll tell you when you're older," she said, with a smile. "For now, I think you need some sleep." And she kissed me on the forehead and tucked my blanket around me, over my sleeping bag.

I must have slept because when I woke up the moon was high in the sky and several hours had clearly passed. The place was in darkness, and if I concentrated I could hear Monica and John's breathing in the next door room. Walter and Mulder's bedding was empty though, much to my alarm. I sat up, glancing towards the porch - and was pleased to see Mulder's angular frame through the screen door. He was bent almost double, his chin just about touching his knees as he sat, his eyes wide open, and bleak. A few seconds later I heard a noise outside - the sound of footsteps, and my initial fear turned to relief as I recognised them as Uncle Walter's.

"Hey," Mulder sat up and I realised he had been waiting for Walter to return.

"Hey." Walter's voice sounded weary. "Look, Mulder, I'm too tired to fight any more."

"Me too," Mulder sighed. "So, d'you think we should take Monica's advice on the fucking option instead?" There was a silence for a moment, and then Walter gave a bark of laughter. He sat down beside Mulder on the porch steps. "I'm sorry," Mulder said at last.

"For what?"

"For all of it. You were right. I've been running from my guilt for a long time, but wherever I go I always take it with me. I loved Scully, Walter. I really loved her, but I could never be what she wanted me to be."

"She loved you too," Walter murmured.

"I ruined her life," Mulder said, gazing at his hands. "Ruined my life, ruined hers, ruined yours..."

"I can take responsibility for my own life," Walter told him firmly. "And if Scully was here she'd say exactly the same thing. And judging by what William said earlier this evening, Samantha isn't blaming you for anything either."

"Maybe she isn't, but I am," Mulder said in wry tones. "I spent years chasing after Samantha because I felt so guilty that I lost her, and because I wanted to see her again so much. But...as time went by, I also used that search to avoid facing up to so many issues in my life. It ended up so that I not only felt guilty about losing her, but I also felt guilty because I knew I was using the search, using her, as a crutch, a hiding place, so that I didn't have to face up to a lot of things that were too difficult for me to deal with."

I didn't know what Mulder was talking about, but a lot of their conversation went over my head in any case. I just caught the underlying sadness - and the sense of a deep and abiding affection.

"Mulder..." Walter began, his voice deep and comforting.

"No, Walter. I can't...I know what you want and I know what you're going to say but I can't...I just can't." Mulder shook his head. "I loved Scully, but I always needed more. You understand that...your marriage to Sharon..."

"Fell apart because I wasn't honest with her or myself. I needed...something more too. Something she could never give me, no matter how much we loved each other," Walter replied, gazing at his hands intently, his sense of guilt as palpable as Mulder's.

"Scully knew," Mulder whispered. "I hate that she knew and I hate that I couldn't be the kind of man she wanted - the man she deserved. I hate that about myself, Walter."

"You are what you are, Mulder. There's no point hating it," Walter sighed.

"Don't you?" Mulder glanced at the big man and the expression in Walter's eyes was so sad that I felt a lump rise in my throat.

"No, Mulder. No, of course not, because if I did I'd have to hate you too and I can't do that." Walter's eyes were gentle and full of love, and that seemed to take Mulder by surprise. His face crumpled, and he fought the tears but was unable to contain them and they started to run down his face.

"I miss her so much, Walter," he whispered.

"I know."

The tears ran, unchecked, down Mulder's face, and after a long while, he rubbed them away with his sleeve, cleared his throat, and pulled himself together.

"You're right, Walter - I have been running away. From a lot of things." Mulder glanced over his shoulder in my general direction but I guess it was too dark for him to see me, because he didn't move.

"You're the bravest man I ever met," Walter told him firmly. "Running away was the wrong choice of words. I'm sorry about that."

"I want to love him, Walter, but I'm scared. I loved Samantha and Scully and my father and mother and I lost them all. I can't lose him when he's all I have left of Scully. How can I live with myself if William dies? How can I live with myself if I fail him?"

"Mulder - there aren't any guarantees," Walter whispered gently. "But the only way you can fail him is by not being involved in his life. Even if you're not his father, you knew his mother better than any of us, and even if she wasn't his biological mother, she was the closest thing to it - she carried him for 9 months, and she loved him. He was her son, and he's your son too."

"And yours?" Mulder said softly. "Yours, and John's and Monica's - he's the world's child, Walter, and he belongs to the world."

"Yes," Walter nodded, "but we're the ones taking care of him on behalf of the world, Mulder. Get to know him. Hang around. We might none of us have very long together - let's make the most of it."

"Four years. We have four years," Mulder sighed. "I wish I knew the truth about him, Walter."

"I think, the challenge for you, will be not knowing, Mulder," Walter replied. "Just loving him without knowing. Loving him for him, and not for what he stands for, or because he was Scully's son. William deserves that. He's a very special little boy."

"I'll try."

They were silent again for awhile, and then Walter started to get up.

"Walter." Mulder placed his hand on Walter's arm, stopping him, and the big man looked at him, and then, slowly, sat back down. "William isn't the only one I'm afraid of loving, Walter," Mulder murmured.

"I know," Walter replied, with the faintest hint of a smile.

"I can't make any promises," Mulder said.

"I wouldn't ask for any," Walter replied. "I've waited this long - I'll keep waiting. One day maybe you'll forgive yourself enough to allow yourself some happiness."

"Maybe. One day," Mulder said softly and then something magical happened.

Walter smiled down at Mulder and I watched, by the light of the moon, as Walter gently caressed Mulder's face and then tipped up his chin, dipped his head, and caught Mulder's lips with his own. It was the most beautiful moment - little sparks of white light spun and twirled around them, like some kind of cosmic firework display, a joyous celebration of their first kiss. It was brief and gentle, a kiss of a deep, abiding love that has waited in the dark for a very long time, uncertain that it could ever flower in the light.

The kiss ended, and they sat there for a long moment, side by side, not touching, and then Mulder leaned in and rested his head on Walter's shoulder. Walter moved his arm and wrapped it around Mulder's thin body and the hard lines of their bodies gradually relaxed. I was struck by how right they seemed when close together like this. It was the same as last night, when Mulder had crept close to Walter and Walter had put his arm over him. Together, they had a synergy that was rich, breathtakingly beautiful and very complex. I couldn't help but think that Mulder and Walter's dance would be a wonderful thing when it finally happened, with a layered richness and depth of sadness, happiness and belonging that would reverberate for a long time. They weren't ready to dance yet though, although I hoped that one day they would.

They sat out there for a long time, just resting against each other like the old friends they were. Finally, Walter disengaged himself and got to his feet.

"Time for bed, Mulder," he said, holding out his hands. Mulder took the offered hands and Walter heaved him to his feet. They returned to the cabin and Mulder went over to his bedding, then paused, and glanced at Walter.

"Why don't you bring them over here?" Walter said. "For warmth. You know you will later in the night if you don't do it now, so you might as well save yourself the trip later." Mulder gave a self-deprecating chuckle, and then gathered up his blankets and pillow and walked over to Walter's side. They curled up together, Walter's arm over Mulder's thigh, Mulder's back pressed into Walter's chest, their bodies melted into one another as if they were one being, and it was only once they were settled that I was finally able to get some sleep myself.

I'd like to say that the tension between my father and my Uncle Walter lessened after their conversation on the porch that night but the truth is that it didn't. My father was such a prickly personality, and Walter a man who would speak his mind and be heard - and that meant that there were plenty of explosive rows. One thing I never doubted though, was that they only fought because they cared so much about each other. I wished my father could let down his defences and allow Walter in as that was the source of so much of their tension, but Mulder was the sum of his experiences, slow to trust, and hurt too much by the past to even consider searching for happiness now, even when that happiness was right under his nose. Walter was his usual patient self, but the repressed attraction between them frequently spilled over. It was only at night that they seemed to declare a truce. No matter how many arguments they had had during the day, at night Mulder would creep into the warm circle of Walter's arms and they'd lie wrapped together; it was the only time that either of them really relaxed.

It was a different, more subdued Fox Mulder who greeted me the following morning. The other adults, by unspoken agreement, left us alone together, although I could see that Monica was itching to ask more about the dead children I had spoken of the previous day - if only to find out more about Luke on John's behalf than for any other reason. John was, in typical John fashion, studiously ignoring the whole topic of dead people. It was somewhere he had no intention of going, which maybe was a good defence mechanism for him. It saved him from a certain amount of heartache after all - it was bad enough that he'd lost the son who meant everything to him, and I knew John wasn't the kind of man who'd find comfort in the notion that Luke was here, but just out of sight. He wanted tangibles and I respected him for not settling for anything less. It didn't matter to Luke - he just liked hanging out with us and he had the combined simplicity not only of his age, but also of his state. It's my experience that dead people are generally less emotionally involved in the world they had left behind than their living relatives could really understand. Occasionally someone, like Samantha, still ached because of the way they had died or because they had a message they wanted to give to someone still alive, but mostly the dead had the detached, peaceful air of those for whom there is no longer any pain; their connection with the world had taken on an entirely new dimension. Some people ask me why I wasn't afraid when Luke, Samantha and Emily showed up, but I honestly wasn't. Why would I have been? They were all people I knew instinctively, people with a connection to me or to those I loved most in the world, and I was aware from the very beginning that they were benign. They wished me no harm - they simply wanted to play. I had no idea then that they also presaged something else, something that would one day prove to be very important to the fate of the world, but a conversation I had with my father that day created the first glimmer of an understanding of how my new young friends fitted into the tapestry of my life.

My father...it felt so strange to think of Fox Mulder as that, and yet, that was the title that had been given to him by Monica, Walter and John, and those were the responsibilities that Walter in particular laid on Mulder's thin shoulders. In truth, I never lacked for parental figures in my life. I was always lucky to be surrounded by people who loved me, whether it was my first mother, my second, or Monica. I count myself fortunate to have known an equal plethora of fathers - Nathaniel, Walter, John and now Mulder. Of them all, Mulder was the least like a conventional father - that role was filled more by Walter - but his place in my life was just as crucial to my overall development. Maybe, because I had so many abilities and facets to my soul that most children do not have, I needed a larger than usual number of people to nurture and encourage all the disparate parts of me in order that they might flourish. If Walter was the kind, comforting but authoritative father of my heart, and John the honest, blunt role model of what a good man should be, it was Mulder who guided my mind and my soul to a greater understanding of myself and my abilities.

My adoptive parents had been scared of those abilities - it marked me out as someone other, someone perhaps ungodly - they were simple, religious folk, and my obvious strangeness unsettled them. They had been wonderful parents for a small child - they had kept me warm, and safe, and fed, and they had loved me with all their hearts. Now the time had come for me to be with people who stretched and developed and nurtured my talents. With the Grangers I had learned to hide what I was, with Walter I had learned acceptance and how to value what made me different...and with Mulder I learned how to fly.

After breakfast that Sunday morning, Mulder followed me out onto the porch and walked with me down to the creek.

"Are the kids here today, William?" He asked. "Is Samantha here?"

"No. They were scared off by the way you all reacted last night. They'll be back though." I recalled their startled faces and how they had scattered in fright at the huge emotional response that had greeted news of their presence, together with the tension that ebbed and flowed constantly between Uncle Walter and Mulder.

"William, I have something to tell you." Mulder sat down on a rock by the creek, and gazed at me thoughtfully. "You're not alone in being able to see the dead," Mulder told me quietly. "There was a time in my life, a few years ago, when I needed help - and it was dead people I knew from my past who provided it. They saved my life - well, with a little help from Walter and John." He grinned.

"And Deputy Director Kersh?" I asked innocently, pushing a twig into the water and trying to make a dam with it between two large stones.

"Kersh?" Mulder looked surprised.

"He helped you too - when you were escaping from that place where you were chained up and hurt. You were all really surprised about Mr. Kersh - you thought he was one of the bad men."

"How do you know all this? Did Walter tell you?"

I shook my head, and bit on my lip, wondering if I'd said the wrong thing.

"William - you aren't in any trouble," Mulder told me, "but you've got to be honest with me or I won't be able to help you and keep you safe."

"Walter didn't tell me about that. He tells me some great stories but he didn't tell me about that," I told Mulder shyly. It felt strange to be talking to this man who I had been told was my real father, this man who was driven by those demons who were always hovering, just out of sight. I wondered if he knew they were there, like dark clouds, sitting on his shoulders, weighing him down. He had such a beautiful mind, so many talents and such a compassionate heart that it made me sad to see him so ravaged by the tragedies of his life. If only he could see himself as I saw him. "Walter told me all about you and Agent Scully," I confided. Mulder's mood changed abruptly at mention of my mother, and I felt the tension in the air snap taut, like a door being slammed. "I caught the memory of Kersh from your mind," I told Mulder with a sigh, wondering if I would ever be able to talk to him about my mother. I was longing to know more about her. She was so close to him that I caught a glimpse after a tantalising glimpse of her memory emanating from him. She hung around him like a scent - the faintest hint of jasmine and apples, the white of her porcelain skin in striking contrast to the red of her hair. "I used to have to be touching a person to see their memories, but I don't need to so much any more - and not at all with you. Things spill out of you," I told him.

He considered that for a moment.

"So it isn't just that you're discovering new skills - your existing skills are getting better too?" He asked.

"I guess." I shrugged. "Do you still see those dead people, Mulder?"

"No." Mulder shook his head. "I think they needed to tell me something important at the time - and now I guess they think I can figure out the important stuff for myself! I wish I had as much faith in me as they do."

"You should." I got up, and stared at him with a puzzled frown. "I wish I could fight them with you, Mulder," I said.

"Fight who?" He had a quizzical look in those hazel eyes of his.

"The demons. They sit on your shoulders like big dark birds...like crows, pecking away at you. I want to...chase them away!" I ran at him, waving my hands and yelling loudly, perhaps thinking, in my naïve, childlike way, that I could chase his demons away as easily as I had chased after the chickens on the ranch. The poor man must have thought that I was possessed. I could only just make out the shadows of those demons using my eyes, which didn't show them in anything like the clarity I'd seen them with during my out of body ramblings - and my childish action didn't change a thing. They were still there, hunched and glowering, when I came to a halt, breathless, at Mulder's knee.

"Demons?" He asked, still staring at me quizzically.

"Not real demons, just...dark clouds upsetting you and whispering nasty things in your ear. You've always had them since you were little like me - maybe a bit older - but there are more of them now, and if you listen to them then you won't be able to do all the things you need to do."

Mulder has since asked me if I understood some of the things I said back then - if I really knew the import of what they meant, and the truth is that on some level I did but mostly I said things by pure instinct. I didn't really understand in my mind about aliens and super soldiers and the coming of the dark times ahead but I had an instinctual grasp of the situation that made sense to me even though I didn't have a clue about the broader picture.

Now he sat there gazing at me with a kind of wonder in his eyes. I reached out a hand to touch him; Mulder hadn't been tactile with me, although I could see by his relationship with Walter, veering as it did from angry struggles to the need for warmth and comfort, that he was a very tactile kind of person. Walter had always been the dispenser of big bear hugs, Monica liked to kiss me and tousle my hair and John often rested a hand on my shoulder, or slapped me heartily on the back but Mulder - Mulder had kept his distance from me, as if scared that touching me would make me real, or force a connection that he wasn't ready for. He had an invisible shield around him, designed to keep most people out - in fact the only person I had seen him let in was Walter, and I remembered the way he had rested his head on Walter's shoulder the previous night.

"Mulder?" I said softly, holding up my hand just a fingertip away from his own. He stared at it for a moment as if considering it, and then, slowly, cautiously, he raised his own hand and our fingers touched. I felt a surge of electricity and a dozen or more images spilled out of him

- what I had been able to see when we weren't touching was only the tip of the iceberg; now I was inundated with his memories and feelings. They crowded in on me, surging like a tide, threatening to overwhelm me. I saw him as he had been when my mother was alive, striding out, full of a confidence that bordered almost on arrogance. He had been so sure of himself, so driven by what he believed was right, but the losses and terrible experiences he had been through along the way had clouded his judgement and dented his self belief. Now I could see the man that Uncle Walter had told me about in his stories, the handsome, charismatic, witty agent, so different to the gaunt, lost soul whose fingers I was touching, and my heart ached to see how changed he was. It was as if he had become separated from some part of himself, a part that was vital and outgoing, that laughed at the world and all it threw at him. Instead he had withdrawn into a bitter, brittle shell, and it neither suited him nor protected him very well.

"You can be him again," I whispered, and as we locked eyes I knew we could both see the same vision - that he was sharing the memories with me as much as I was taking them.

"No. I can't. He's dead," he told me bleakly. "He died with her..."

An image of my mother rose up between us. She was running, and Mulder was shouting something at her, and then she was falling, endlessly falling, the stain of blood on her white blouse the same colour as her hair. He picked her up and held her, his eyes disbelieving.

"You can't leave me, Scully!" He screamed at her, his voice hoarse with pain. Her eyelids fluttered over her blue eyes.

"William," she told him, urgently, and he nodded and kissed her pale face, and she died in his arms.

I pushed aside the memory, and came back to the present to find his eyes glassy with unshed tears. I breached those invisible defences of his, ignoring them as if they did not exist, climbed onto his lap, put my arms around his neck, and rested my head against his. We sat like that for a long time, and then, finally, his hands came up and rested on my back, and then he moved his head and kissed my cheek. I felt my heart swell for my father loved me. Even despite himself he loved me. My father - this stranger, this complex, tortured man - my father loved me - and with that knowledge came a curious kind of peace. We sat there for a long time, and then, finally, I knew it was time to ask the question that had burning inside me from the moment I first met him.

"Tell me about my mother," I said.

Mulder gave a long sigh and I knew this was a question he had been dreading. To his credit, he didn't refuse me, and a few seconds later dozens of images came into my mind. I saw my mother, impossibly young, glowing with youth and energy and a vibrant belief in herself, in her science, in her world view - sure that nobody could shake or alter it. I saw my mother's first meeting with my father, and what struck me above everything else was the mental spark that existed between them. This was, in many ways, a meeting of opposites; she small, he tall; she a scientist, distrustful of intuition, he someone who liked to work on his gut instincts; she a determined sceptic, and he a true believer. Where they had common ground was in the meeting of their minds and that was where their true attraction lay. They were both phenomenally smart - each an expert in their own field of knowledge, and they sparred off

each other, enjoying a mental and verbal battle of wits. I loved seeing them in those early days, talking and fighting and laughing together, teasing each other, attracted by the mental dance they were performing.

Time passed, and a different story emerged. She felt sidelined by his work - he was the one with the quest, and she was constantly challenged in her scepticism by the suspicion that he was probably right - and therefore she was wrong. Feeling her worldview beginning to crumble she dug her heels in, trying to find the answers in science that were proving ever more elusive. A series of personal tragedies took their toll on them both, crushing them and creating silences where once there had been confidences. He lost a father, she a sister. He began to realise the extent of his personal involvement in a conspiracy that he hated, while she was abducted, and later struggled with an invasive cancer that threatened her life. Slowly the spark began to fade - although the love never did. Now they loved each other like old friends, people who had gone through too much together not to love one another, but who had each been bowed under the weight of their own personal tragedy. Their wants and needs changed; he was driven even more intensely by his personal quest - while she wanted to slow down, to have a family, to become the person she had once wanted to be before his quest consumed her.

Trembling, I held Mulder tight, feeling, through him, the warmth, the smell, and the touch of the woman who had been part of my life for such a short time. Agent Scully, my mother, looked at me across the years through Mulder's memories, her blue eyes flashing, and her smile wide and bright. She had a little rosebud mouth, a beautiful pale face, and fiery red hair. She was dynamic, strong, and clever - and I missed her so much that I ached. I saw her longing for a child, her need becoming so strong that when I was finally placed in her arms she wept tears of joy. I could feel her love through Mulder, knew that she had wanted me, loved me, cared for me with every atom of her being, and ultimately sacrificed her own life to save me. Those memories were bittersweet. I had been fascinated by Agent Dana Scully from the moment Uncle Walter had first told me stories about her, back in the hired man's room on the ranch. Now, I could finally get to know my mother and it hurt - suddenly it came home to me how much I had lost. Until now she had just been an abstract concept, but through Mulder's memories she had become real to me. My face crumpled, and I was a six year old boy again, not the strange child, old beyond his years, with an array of bizarre gifts, but a little boy who had lost his mother. Before I had not known how beautiful she was, in mind, body, soul and spirit but now I knew it made my loss even harder to bear. I cried my heart out into Mulder's shirt, clinging to him for comfort, and he wrapped his arms around me, and rocked me back and forth, not saying a word, his own loss as hard to bear as my own.

My father and I came to an understanding of each other on that day. He saw me as a child in need of a father as much as the missing piece at the centre of the jigsaw that was his quest - and I came to see why he was so always so angry, restless and full of hurt. More than anything else, we both learned, through my mother, how to love each other.

Book Three: Saoshyant by Xanthe

Mulder stayed with us at the cabin for the next few weeks while John came to visit whenever he could, but, as I had predicted, we didn't stay long at the little cabin – although I could never have foreseen the hurried manner of our leaving.

One night, a couple of weeks later, I was woken by a sense of foreboding. Something had upset the intricate rhythm of the cabin and its environs. I was familiar with every bird that sang, every leaf on every tree, and I knew immediately that something alien had interrupted that peace. I remembered the last time I had come face to face with an alien creature and I let out a howl of fear. Uncle Walter was at my side within seconds.

"William – are you okay? Did you have a nightmare?" He asked. I did still occasionally get nightmares about the night my adoptive parents had been murdered but this was something different.

"No...we've got to go - we gotta...there's one of them coming...he's near..." I said, between frantic, gasping breaths.

The adults didn't even stop to question me – they took me absolutely on trust. Walter glanced up at Mulder and nodded and Mulder nodded back.

"It's happened," Walter said. "Wake Monica and call John. How far away is he?" He asked me, getting me out of my sleeping bag and dressing me quickly.

"A couple of miles down the road – but he's fast," I gasped.

"Okay. We have time. Don't worry." Walter gave me a reassuring smile, dressed himself quickly, and then hauled me up into his arms. By this time Monica and Mulder were both ready. I realised later that they must have thought up a plan for precisely this kind of eventuality, because they knew exactly what they were doing. Mulder stood guard at the door with his gun while Monica went outside and got the car. She brought it around to the front of the house, and Walter bundled me out of the cabin and into the back of the car. Mulder got into the front and Monica put her foot down hard on the gas. It had been less than five minutes since I had woken them.

Monica drove fast down the road, while Mulder sat with his gun raised ready. We were all alert, aware of the danger, but my senses were more finely tuned than anyone else's and I was trembling in the back of the car. I was desperately scared that another massacre would take place tonight, similar to that which had torn my world apart a few months previously. Uncle Walter put a big arm around me and held me against his solid, reassuring chest but even so, I was terrified. I nearly jumped out of my skin when the dark shape appeared in the middle of the road. Monica and Mulder, both trained and experienced FBI agents, barely blinked. Monica drove straight over the creature standing there without swerving. There was a sickening crunch that made me scream and put my hands over my ears, but, looking out of the back window, I saw the being we'd just run over get to his feet, and begin running after us. He was fast – his feet were like a blur as he ran, and I knew he could outrun the car.

"He's going to catch us!" I screamed, and Mulder turned around in his seat with a grimly determined look on his face pulled a gun out of his pocket and loaded a cartridge into it. I felt

the metal of the cartridge reverberating and tingling even without touching it – and knew immediately that it was magnetite. Walter must have known too because Mulder turned to give Walter a grim look, and Walter nodded to him. A few seconds later there was a thump on the side of the car and I saw the super soldier pounding on the window with his fists.

"Saoshyant!" He called. "Saoshyant!" I had never heard the strange word before and had no idea what it meant but he called it over and over again as he pounded on the door. Mulder opened his window, leaned out, took aim...and then hesitated.

"Saoshyant! Save us, Saoshyant! Save us!" The man screamed.

"Shoot, Mulder for chrissakes," Walter yelled. Mulder frowned, but his finger tightened on the trigger and a second later there was a flash of light, a booming sound, and the acrid smell of gunfire filled the car. I heard the bullet rend the super soldier's flesh, and then he was screaming, his body jack-knifing all over the road. He let go of the car and Monica wasted no time in putting her foot down on the gas, leaving the writhing, agonised creature in the road, far behind us. My super efficient senses were so finely tuned by the fear of the whole event that I could hear him long after he was out of earshot to the others.

"Mulder – what the hell was that about?" Walter demanded, as we sped away to safety. "Why did you hesitate?"

Mulder turned in his seat to look at us.

"That was Billy Miles," he said, in a horrified whisper.

I had no idea who Billy Miles was – I was still completely freaked out by the night's events. I clung to Uncle Walter, sobbing hopelessly. Even though the danger had passed, I was suffering the after effects of all the tension. Walter held me but I was inconsolable.

"Where are we going? Where will we stay? Did you kill him, Mulder? Is he still chasing us?" I was shaking, convinced that this Billy Miles creature could still find us and hurt us.

"No, he isn't chasing us, William. It's okay," Mulder said softly. "I don't know whether the bullet killed him or not but we're safe for now."

"What was he saying?" Monica asked. "What did he call William? Sowshe...what?"

"Saoshyant," Mulder told her. "Sow-she-aan," he enunciated slowly.

"What the hell does that mean?" Walter demanded.

Mulder was quiet for a moment and then he said: "It's from ancient Iranian eschatological texts. It means saviour."

"And you're going to tell us what eschatological means too, right?" Monica asked.

"It's a good thing Doggett isn't here," Mulder said with the faintest hint of a grin. "Eschatological refers to that branch of theology concerned with the end of the world."

We were all silent after that. I clung to Walter, the words 'end of the world' churning around inside my mind along with images of that creature Mulder had named 'Billy Miles' lying writhing in the road back there, screaming, 'saoshyant!' over and over again. I didn't want the world to end – not this beautiful world, full of interconnected dances, teeming with species, alive with smells and sounds and tastes – I couldn't bear it. I buried my face in Walter's neck and when Mulder reached out to touch my shoulder I twisted away from him with a disconsolate howl. Only Walter could touch me when I was like this. I loved them all – Monica, John, Mulder and Walter, but, as I've said before, Walter was my security blanket, the father of my heart, and when I was half out of my mind with terror instinct took over and it was Walter I needed.

We drove through that night and sometime around dawn, we arrived in a little town. Monica parked the car on the driveway of a house, and Walter got out, with me still clinging to him like a baby monkey. We walked into the house and Mulder flicked a light switch to reveal a hallway with walls and floors of dark, polished mahogany. There was an austere, formal feel to the place, and I didn't like it.

"Where are we?" I whispered, missing the tiny, homely cabin already. For all that it had lacked creature comforts, it had at least been vibrantly alive. This place felt soulless and empty.

"This was my father's bolthole," Mulder said, in a tight lipped voice and I sensed a huge conflict in him as he recalled his father. I had an image of a stern, distant man, unconnected to anything, least of all his own son. "He left it to me in his will – it came as one helluva shock to me as I didn't know the place even existed – and neither does anyone else, so it'll be a good place to hide. For now anyway."

"Bolthole?" Monica asked, opening the door into a library that contained row upon row of neatly ordered books.

"Yes." Mulder nodded curtly. "He came here to get away from my mother – and from me too I guess." He shrugged. "Also...I think he held meetings here. Syndicate meetings." Mulder exchanged a glance with Walter and I shivered. I didn't know who or what the Syndicate might be but I knew that whatever it was, it was nothing good. A smell of polish and evil lingered around the place, and I hated it.

"I want to go back to the cabin," I said firmly.

"Me too." Mulder gave me a rueful smile, and his unexpected agreement deflated my moment of mutiny. "We can't though – if Billy tracked us there then someone else could."

That made sense but I was about to argue some more anyway when there was a soft knock at the door. We all exchanged glances, and I buried myself in Walter's neck once more, with a wordless wail of alarm, convinced that the Billy Miles creature had followed us.

"It's okay," Monica said. "It's probably John. I called him and told him to meet us here, remember?" Everyone relaxed a fraction, but all the same, I noticed that Mulder still held his gun in his hand, and Walter was tensed, ready to flee with me in his arms if need be. Monica opened the door, cautiously, and we all gave an almost audible sigh of relief when John stepped swiftly inside, closing the door shut silently behind him.

"Sorry." He made a face, sensing the tension in the room. "I got here about an hour ago. I was sitting outside waiting for you to show. Are you okay? I was so worried." He caught hold of Monica and looked searchingly into her eyes.

"I'm fine, John. We all are," she told him.

"Thank god." He pulled her into a hug, and kissed her firmly on the lips. "Now, what the hell happened?"

"I'll fill you in later, but William's exhausted. We need to get him to bed," Monica said. John nodded, and I realised, suddenly that I **was** exhausted - more from all the fear and emotional turmoil than lack of sleep. Walter walked me up the stairs and into a bedroom, and then he and Monica made up a bed for me, while Mulder turned the heating on to warm the chill out of the place – although it never entirely went away. Monica disappeared for a few minutes and returned with a bag she had retrieved from the car, from which she proceeded to unpack a small selection of clothes and pyjamas for me.

"We kept a supply of clothes, sleeping bags and food in the car – just in case something like this happened," Monica told me with a little wink. "It's enough to see us through a few days until we have a chance to buy some more."

So much of their careful planning had gone over my head; I lived in my own little world, attuned to the minutiae of my senses, able to see dead people, but it had come as a complete surprise to me that Mulder had magnetite bullets for his gun, or that they had discussed what they would do if a super soldier came to the cabin in the middle of the night. I felt oddly reassured – I knew that all my protectors were trained FBI agents, so if I was going to be safe anywhere, it would be with them. All the same, I had been so freaked out by the night's events that it took me several hours to fall asleep – and I wouldn't let go of Uncle Walter the entire time – in the end the poor man gave in and got into the bed beside me, and only then did I finally relax.

I spent the next few days exploring Mulder's house. It was full of dark, polished corridors, its rooms decorated in forest greens and browns. It was a man's house – and an old man at that. There was nothing homely, welcoming, young or female about it. We all hated it, even Mulder – especially Mulder – and we had been there less than a week when he said he had to leave. I didn't want him to go – and I looked at Walter, expecting – hoping - that he would argue with Mulder, and talk him out of it, but instead Walter just sighed and nodded.

"The magnetite bullets worked but we'll need more," Mulder said, as if trying to convince Walter, although the big man hadn't put up any resistance. "A lot more," Mulder said. "I need to know whether it killed Billy, Walter. I need to find out where Billy's been hiding, what he knows, why he called William 'saoshyant'. I need to find out all of that and I can't do it sitting here. There are many ways William needs to be protected, and finding out information about the people threatening him and working on weapons to stop them is just as important."

"I agree." Walter shrugged.

"It's what I do best," Mulder said, as if he was still trying to convince Walter. "Ferreting around, finding out what's going on."

"Monica and I will protect William," Walter said with a nod. "And John when he's here. We'll be fine."

I stared at him aghast – why wasn't he arguing with Mulder as he usually did? Why wasn't he putting up a fight over this? I was distraught – John had left us a few days ago, and although he had promised to visit whenever he could, I missed him. Now, Mulder was planning on taking off as well? Supposing Monica decided she needed to go 'ferreting around' too, and what about Walter? Was he liable to disappear out of my life as well? That was unthinkable to me – I knew that I simply couldn't go on without Walter – he was such a constant in my young life, and the only person left from the time when my parents were alive. But if Mulder, my father, could leave, then surely anyone could? My feelings built up into a crescendo and spilled over.

"No!" I said, stamping my foot on the floor angrily. "I don't want you to go, Mulder."

The adults stared at me, startled by my sudden display of temper. They were used to my dreamy ways and placid acceptance of most things – only Walter had ever seen me having a tantrum before, and they weren't exactly frequent occurrences. Yet, however strange my powers were, and advanced my understanding of the world and the people in it, there were still times when I was just a scared little boy, and this was one of them.

"I know. I'm sorry, William, but I think it would be best. I think there's some stuff I need to find out," Mulder told me, crouching down so that he was eye level with me. I wasn't prepared to listen though, and I stormed out of the library and up to my bedroom where I threw myself on the bed and crossed my arms over my chest. I was mightily annoyed when nobody chased after me, and, closing my eyes, I decided to eavesdrop on the conversation downstairs.

"D'you think I should go after him and explain some more?" Mulder was saying. Walter shook his head.

"He'll come around – poor kid, his whole life keeps changing every few months. No wonder he wants to keep everyone he loves in one place."

"Am I doing the right thing?" Mulder asked. "Do you think I **should** stay?"

"No," Monica piped up from where she was sitting in an armchair in the corner of the library, surrounded by a pile of books. "Mulder, I think you have to go," she said. "I've been doing some reading up about this 'saoshyant' person and it's freaking me out. We definitely need to find out more. Listen to this:

'Saoshyant, a saviour born from Zoroaster's seed, will come and the dead shall be resurrected, body and soul. As the final accounting is made, husband is set against wife and brother against brother as the righteous and the damned are pointed out by the divine judge Saoshyant.' "Divine judge?" Monica glanced at the two men with a raised eyebrow but I was more interested in the bit about the dead being resurrected, body and soul. Samantha, Emily and Luke hadn't been to visit at the new house yet, but I knew they weren't far away and would appear again soon.

"Or how about this." Monica picked up another book and began to read:

"In Iran, originally the title of the hero and coming saviour. According to the Avesta, he renews the world and resurrects the dead. Saoshyant will purify both the wicked and the righteous by causing all to pass through a river of molten metal (obtained through the melting of the mountains). This experience will be pleasant for the righteous (like being bathed in warm milk) but agonizing for the wicked (until all sins are purged away)." Do you really think William could be this saoshyant person?" she asked.

"It's possible," Mulder shrugged.

"What about the Zoroaster's seed part?" Walter asked. Mulder shook his head, slowly, considering it.

"Well, William's birth was a miracle of and by itself, as we all know. The way I look at it, one of three things could have happened. One..." Mulder held up one finger, "Somehow the IVF worked, and Scully got pregnant with my child. It's possible – they said it hadn't worked but maybe they made a mistake. Two – our ancestors primed our DNA so that when the aliens next arrived to threaten our planet, someone would be born who would have the innate knowledge and ability to fight them. Our ancestors fought a vicious battle with these guys last time around after all – the planet was so badly devastated that they were plunged back into the stone age and it's taken several millennia for our race to recover. Maybe they foresaw that, but they also knew how to defeat the aliens. We know they were technologically advanced because of those spaceships – it's possible they set a DNA time bomb, priming it to go off in response to certain triggers – such as the radiation from the alien ships coming into our solar system. And Scully happened to be the lucky recipient of that little gift."

"Thank god John isn't here." Monica gave a little chuckle. "I don't think he'd like that second explanation very much!"

"And the third option, Mulder?" Walter asked quietly.

Mulder shrugged. "I'm not ruling out the possibility that God decided to intervene personally," he said.

Most of what Mulder had said went right over my head but it seemed to have a massive impact on all of them because nobody moved or spoke for several long minutes. I'm often asked about my own personal religious beliefs, but the truth is that I don't really have any. I was brought up by very religious parents until I was 6, but, despite that religion wasn't something that I ever really noticed to be honest. I might at one stage have had some vague idea of God as a big bearded man in the sky, but I was so preoccupied with the earth, and all the wondrous creatures living on it that I never gave much thought to the divine. Now, well, now I just see the beautiful, amazing, interconnected threads, woven into the fabric of existence of every living being on this planet. I truly think that's the closest thing to evidence of the hand of God, whoever or whatever that god might be. He or she is certainly a far greater being than me. I can only observe and wonder at the intricate pattern of life-forces that teem on this small planet; I give my total admiration to any being that could not only conceive of all this, but also create it.

"I wonder if we'll ever find out the truth," Monica murmured finally, breaking the silence.

Mulder gave a smile. "The truth?" He shook his head. "I've been looking for it my entire life and I haven't found it yet."

"Are you sure?" Walter looked at him quizzically. "Because right now I'd say that that little boy upstairs is the closest to it that you'll ever get."

"That little boy who is eavesdropping on us as we speak?" Monica said, with a sweet smile. I sat straight up, wondering how she'd known. A few seconds later, the three adults appeared in the doorway.

"William – were you just listening in on our conversation?" Walter asked, with a frown.

I bit on my lip. "I'm sorry. There's so much I want to know," I told them apologetically, my earlier tantrum completely forgotten.

"There are some things we say privately because we think they'd hurt you if you heard them," Walter explained, coming to sit on the bed beside me. I was glad that he didn't seem to be angry.

"William – did you understand what we were saying about how you were born?" Mulder asked carefully, from where he was standing in the doorway.

I nodded, slowly.

"Do you have any ideas about that, William?" My father asked. "Do you know why or how you were born?"

Monica took a sharp intake of breath, and I felt Walter tense beside me – he wasn't comfortable with this line of questioning but, like the other two, he wanted to know my answer.

"I don't know anything, Mulder," I told him with big, scared eyes. "I never heard that sowsheyan name before the other night."

"That's fine, William," Walter said, shooting Mulder a glare over my head, warning him not to pursue this line of questioning any further. None of them mentioned that conversation again, but that didn't stop me thinking about it. In many ways my personality insulated me against too much introspection. I had always been perfectly happy with myself, and I never worried about who my parents were. I accepted, without question, that Mulder and Scully were my parents – they were my spiritual parents and they had in a very real sense given birth to me, whether or not they were biologically connected to me. Of course I was too young back then to understand how or why that was, I just felt it – and I always trusted my feelings.

Mulder left the following day. I wanted to refuse to say goodbye to him but it wasn't in my nature to sulk for long, and, although I knew I'd miss him, I also knew that it would hurt him more than either he or I could bear if I didn't kiss him goodbye. I could now read other people's feelings as easily as my own. Sometimes, without even concentrating, I could feel myself slipping into their skins, feeling what they felt, hearing their thoughts, and experiencing what it was like to be them - very like my early encounter with the duck back on

the ranch. Now, I found it was becoming easier and easier to slip inside another person's mind.

Another of the new skills I had discovered was that I could see the threads that connected every living creature on the planet. I had always been fascinated by their dances, their songs, their resonance, but now I could actually see little sparks of light weaving them together, like a massive web. I remembered when I had first met Mulder, how the spark of light connecting him to Uncle Walter had been visible to me before I started being able to see those threads anywhere else. The threads between Mulder and my Uncle Walter were particularly vibrant, and they constantly pulsed with a pure white energy; mostly, with other people these glowing threads were more muted, sometimes so wispy as to be almost transparent. It was a whole new world to me, and I spent many long hours studying the glowing lights, learning their form and their vibrations. Monica was startled by how much of my day I could spend in complete silence, just staring into space. Walter was used to my ways, and assured her that for me, this was 'normal' behaviour.

"But he sits staring at nothing for hours on end," Monica whispered, tip-toeing around where I was sitting in the library, staring out of the window at the tree outside, studying all the glowing fronds that connected it to the earth, to the worms and caterpillars and ants and all the human passers by.

"Not nothing," I told her, startling her as I came back to life. "Not nothing, Monica. I'm seeing something wonderful – something beautiful." I turned to her, and my sense of vision was still so switched on after my hours of study, that she appeared to me to have a thick halo of multi-hued energy pulsing around her body. From that, sparked little white threads that connected her to me, to Walter, to the spider crawling along behind the couch – to everything and everyone.

"Here." I took her hand purely on instinct, and connected her to what I was seeing, showing her the world through my eyes. She gave a gasp of amazement and almost fell over. Her eyes widened with wonder as she looked around. She reached out a glowing hand and followed the fluttery, feathery white trail that connected her to Walter. She touched him, and he was drawn into our little world, sharing its visions. He sat down on the couch with a thump, dumbstruck by what he was seeing.

"William – this is what you see, every day?" He asked, his voice full of awe as he gazed around the glowing, pulsing room.

"Yeah – I don't have to see it this bright – I can shut it off - but sometimes it's so peaceful to just tune into it," I told him.

"No wonder you can spend hours staring into space," Monica said breathlessly. "It's beautiful, William."

"It is – and so is this," I said, squeezing her hand, and feeling through her, Uncle Walter's consciousness, where she was in turn holding his hand. I had never connected myself to other people in this way before and I loved it. I could feel their thoughts, their feelings, their essences – their souls, and it energised me, flooding me with a remarkable sensation that felt like pure joy or pure energy – or something indescribable but so totally uplifting that I felt as if my small body couldn't contain it.

"William!" Monica called. "You're... expanding." I looked down at my body and laughed. She was right – whereas before I had been a corporeal entity, surrounded by a glowing aura, now I was more light than substance, and I felt it would be so easy to give up my body completely, and just dissipate into the air, becoming one with the entire world.

"Shit... William...!" Walter wrenched his hand away from Monica's and I felt a crashing blow of disappointment as he left the little triumvirate we had created between us. My body began to take form again, small and so limiting that I could have wept. "William! Let her go!" Walter said again, shaking me. I was so startled that I released Monica's hand, and then howled as her warmth and kindness disconnected from my own consciousness and I was alone once more. The world swam back into view, and I found myself lying on my back on the floor, looking up into Uncle Walter's worried brown eyes.

"That was so beautiful," I whispered. "Why did you leave? Why did you take it away?"

"You were disappearing... I was afraid," Walter told me, helping me to sit up. My body felt strange; too big, too clumsy. I longed to be weightless, and consumed by that energy again.

"Did you mean for that to happen, William?" Monica asked, crouching in front of me. I shook my head, dumbly.

"I... I think, one day, I'll learn how to do it right..." I whispered. "But I'm too young and I couldn't control it."

Walter gathered me up in his arms and I could feel his heart pounding in his chest. "Just take it easy, William," he told me. "Learn to walk before you can run, huh?"

That whole experience gave me quite a scare, and I spent the next few days being extra clingy with Uncle Walter as a result. He was as endlessly patient with me as always, and gave me reading lessons using the books from Mulder's extensive library, distracting me by reminding me that there were other kinds of knowledge to be acquired apart from the mysterious skills I had been born with. Neither of us left the house or the yard – me because I wasn't allowed to and him because he would never leave me. However, from looking out of the windows and climbing the tree in the back yard, I figured out that we were living in an ordinary house, in an ordinary street, in what seemed to be an ordinary looking town. I'd never lived in a town for any length of time before and was intrigued by all the scents and sounds. Even this quiet town was much noisier in terms of the sheer hustle and bustle of human existence than my life at the ranch and then at the cabin and I was often kept awake at night by the sounds of cars driving past the front of the house, and the nearness of the people in the houses all around us. Even without trying I could hear the people who lived around us, could smell them, and had become familiar with some of their stray thought processes. Mulder's house was set in an affluent area of town, and had some land around it, giving us some privacy, but we still had neighbours nearby. I knew the woman who lived in the nearest house to ours wondered who we were as she so rarely saw us, and that the man who lived more or less opposite us had an illness that made him cough.

Life fell into a pattern once more – Monica would do the grocery shopping and buy us any new clothes we needed in the little mall in town, while Walter took care of me. I spent my days listening to his strong, deep voice as he taught me how to read and write, how to do arithmetic and he told me about the geography and history of the world. We also had fun

building a tree house in the garden, and playing ball. Luke, Samantha and Emily dropped by occasionally, so there were other children to play with when I tired of adult company. John kept in contact regularly, but we hadn't heard from Mulder which I knew was worrying Walter. Occasionally Walter would try calling Mulder but his cell phone was invariably switched off. Sometimes Walter would sit and think about Mulder, and his thoughts always seemed to alternate between him fantasising about shaking Mulder and yelling at him, or holding him and kissing him, which I thought was funny.

One day, about 6 weeks after we'd arrived, when Monica was out shopping, there was a knock at the door. Walter and I exchanged glances and he put his finger over his mouth and made his way to the window to look out.

"It's a man," I said before he got there. "No, two men. They've got a painted car with a flashing light on it – a police car."

Walter stopped still where he was standing, and I could see him trying to figure out what to do; if we remained silent, then there was always a chance they would return, and the next time they might not take no for an answer. On the other hand, if he opened the door then he risked them being hostile, and discovering me. There was another knock on the front door - more urgent-sounding this time.

"William – are they human?" He asked me.

"Yes." I nodded. "The older man is worried about something. He's very suspicious. The younger one is just doing what he's told."

"Okay." Walter came to a decision. "We're going to answer the door, and you're going to pretend that you're my son – okay?"

"Okay," I nodded happily enough.

"So call me Dad, not 'Uncle Walter' if they should ask – but don't come out unless I call for you," he warned. I nodded again. Walter left the room and went to answer the door and I stayed in the library, listening. I heard the door open.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," the older man said. Closing my eyes, I could see that he had thin, ginger hair, and a large pot belly. "I'm Sheriff Hank Mabbut. We had a report that there was a little boy living here?"

Walter was silent. I sensed his real anxiety – why was a sheriff knocking on our door, asking this question in particular?

"Sir? Could you confirm that?" The sheriff asked.

"Yes." Walter nodded stiffly.

"We've heard he's school age – but he doesn't seem to be enrolled in any school around here," the sheriff said. "Is there an explanation for that, sir?"

"Yes. He's my son – he's not been well," Walter said slowly, playing for time. "I'm home schooling him for now."

"What's been wrong with him?" Mabbut asked.

"Uh, it's a rare genetic disorder," Walter improvised.

"Could we see the boy, sir? It's just routine. We'd like to make sure the lad is okay." The man was very nice, but I sensed an undercurrent to his questions and I knew that he was lying.

"William!" Walter called and I went to stand next to him. Sheriff Mabbut looked at me with shrewd, narrowed eyes, and I had the feeling that he was searching for something.

"William?" He sounded as if he was questioning my name. I nodded, staring at him with big eyes. He smiled at me reassuringly. "When did you arrive in town, son?" He asked. Walter's hand came down on my shoulder and he squeezed.

"A few weeks ago," I replied honestly.

"It's just that we have a missing person report out on a boy and a man answering your descriptions..." Sheriff Mabbut said to Walter, "...in connection with the deaths of the Granger family in Wyoming."

"I read about that," Walter said. "I heard they found the bodies of the boy and the man who abducted him. Poor kid." He squeezed my shoulder again.

"There are still some question marks over those bodies," the sheriff replied. "The boy might not be Adam Granger, and Walter Skinner still hasn't come forward so that he can be eliminated from the investigation. As an ex-FBI agent you'd think he would want to clear his name, wouldn't you?" He smiled at Walter, but it was a grim smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"I hadn't heard there was another suspect still at large," Walter said, frowning. "I though they solved the case."

"They found a camp a few miles from the Granger home. Seems that the family were being watched for a few months before the killer struck," the sheriff said. "So, what is it you do for a living, sir?"

"I'm retired – I retired early to spend some time with my son. I used to work in an office," Walter replied.

"I see. I'd like to see some identification if you wouldn't mind, sir."

"I'm afraid I don't have any. We came here suddenly after a death in the family and I had my wallet stolen just yesterday. I could easily get something sent on to you though," Walter said steadily. "It would only take a couple of days."

"I'm afraid we need to see something now, sir. If you don't have anything then I'll have to ask you to accompany me to the sheriff's office."

"Are you arresting me?" Walter asked incredulously.

"No, sir. I just need to make some routine enquiries and I'd like your help."

"Look, I can get you identification. I can call a friend." I caught a mental image of John rising in Walter's mind.

"We can take care of that down at the office," Mabbut said firmly. "Your name, sir?"

"I'm John Reyes," Walter said without hesitating. "And this is my son, William. My wife, Monica, is out shopping. If I could just call her..." He reached for the cell phone in his jeans pocket, only to find his hand stopped. Everyone was suddenly very tense and I realised they thought Walter was going for a gun. Walter realised too, and raised his hands very slowly. "I was just reaching for my phone to call my wife," he explained.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, sir. I'm going to have to ask you to come with us," the sheriff said. I could tell by the look on Walter's face that he knew, as well as I did, that the sheriff was lying about something. I sensed that Walter wanted to argue with the man, but also that he was wary of showing off too much of his knowledge of legal procedures by doing so – the sheriff already knew that Walter Skinner was once an Assistant Director of the FBI after all.

"All right. We'll come with you," Walter said. "I've got nothing to hide. You're harassing innocent people here, Sheriff."

The sheriff made no reply – he just ushered us towards his car. There wasn't to be honest, much else that Walter could have done. If he'd resisted then he'd have drawn even more attention to us, and both the police officers carried guns – if we'd tried to run then we risked being hurt, and I knew that Walter would never risk me in that way.

The sheriff took us to his office, and we were locked into a small but comfortable interrogation room with a table in the middle and a toilet in the corner. A few minutes later, the sheriff joined us, locking the door behind us. He laid a file on the table and gestured to Uncle Walter that he should take a look at it. Walter flicked it open reluctantly – to reveal two photographs. One was of me, taken a couple of years previously. I was sitting on my adoptive mother's knee and we were both smiling at the camera. The other was of Walter, wearing an FBI tag on his suit that clearly identified him as Assistant Director Walter Skinner. He looked strange in the picture – I'd never seen him looking so formal, dressed up in a suit, but he wore it as if he was his armour, and clothing he was very familiar with. I wondered then about his life before he had come into mine – what had he been? What kind of existence had he led?

"Now, the boy looks pretty similar – but the photo is a few years old so maybe he isn't Adam Granger." The sheriff shrugged. "But I'd lay bets that you're Walter Skinner."

Walter's jaw did a savage sideways clench. "I told you my name is John Reyes," he said. "And this is not Adam Granger - he's my son, William."

"Well, I'll just have to run some checks to find out," the sheriff said. He looked at me again, his eyes gleaming as he glanced from the photograph to me, and then back again. I didn't like the expression on his face, and sank back against Uncle Walter.

"I haven't done anything wrong! You can't keep me here without charge," Walter protested.

"As a matter of fact I can." The sheriff replied, standing his ground. "I make the decisions about what happens here. You're strangers around here – and I'm mighty careful about who I allow to stay in this town these days."

Walter frowned, his eyes meeting mine. The sheriff's comments about 'strangers' was unexpected, and didn't seem to tie in with what he had been saying about Adam Granger.

"I want to call my lawyer," Uncle Walter demanded. The sheriff shook his head.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. Now, you can co-operate and we can do things the easy way, or I can call the social workers and put the boy in protective custody - and keep you locked up here until I can get some positive ID," the sheriff said.

I could clearly hear Walter thinking through his options; co-operating would win us more time. Monica might have returned by now and alerted John and Mulder so there was every possibility of rescue if we could just stay here, together. I could see that Walter's biggest fear was that I'd be taken out of his immediate protection. That thought upset him so much that I could feel his heart rate rise as he considered it. He knew how much I depended on him and how lost and afraid I'd be with strangers after all that had happened to me. He knew that if I went into the care of strangers there would be nobody to protect me from the super soldiers - and nobody who would understand my unique abilities.

"I'll co-operate," Walter spat.

"Good." The sheriff nodded. "First, I need some fingerprints off you." Walter agreed to the fingerprint test, but the next test was altogether stranger. The sheriff took a small vial out of his pocket, opened it, and then knocked out what looked like a spoonful of rust coloured dust onto the table. I could feel the tingle emanating from the dust immediately and knew it was magnetite.

"Touch it," the sheriff ordered. Walter looked at me, puzzled, but put his finger into the dust. The sheriff seemed satisfied. He nodded at me.

"And you, son," he ordered. I was scared, but there didn't seem to be any choice. I knew that magnetite burned my skin in a way it didn't with Walter or Monica or any of the others. On the other hand, it didn't hurt me in the extreme way it hurt the super soldiers – it was more of a burning, tingling kind of feeling than any real pain. Something told me it would be best to disguise my true reactions to the magnetite dust, so I stuck my finger in it, held it there for a few seconds and then withdrew it. The tip was smarting, but with that came a peculiar kind of sensation. I had never been this close to magnetite before, with it surrounding my flesh in this way, and although it prickled, I felt vividly drawn to it. There was something about its texture that made me able to see it down to every last atom. It was almost as if I was seeing the structure of the metal itself and I had a sudden image of it as warm liquid, glowing and powerful. The vision faded as soon as I withdrew my finger, and I clenched my fists so that

the sheriff wouldn't see how red my finger was. He seemed satisfied with the experiment though – more than satisfied because he swallowed hard, shot me a look of profound awe and then withdrew, taking his dust with him and locking the door behind him.

"Are you okay, William?" Walter asked when we were alone. I held up my finger, which was still smarting, and Walter kissed it.

"That'll make it better," he smiled. "You were very brave, William."

"It only hurt a little bit. Mainly it just felt strange," I told him, looking around the room and wondering how long we'd have to stay here.

There was a small bed in the room, which was big enough for me to sleep on, and food and water had been left for us on the table. There were no windows. I watched as Uncle Walter examined the room for some means of escape, even though he knew he wouldn't find any.

"Is that man allowed to keep us here, Uncle Walter?" I asked, sitting on the side of the bed, my legs hanging over the edge, swinging aimlessly.

"No. He sure as hell isn't," Walter replied grimly. "Something else is going on here, William. Something I can't figure out."

"He kept looking at me," I murmured, unsettled by our incarceration.

"I noticed," Walter said tersely. "Damn. Monica won't know where we've been taken, even if she's back by now. If only I'd been able to call John..."

"I could contact him," I said serenely.

"What?" Uncle Walter came over to me, a frown creasing his wide forehead.

"I think I might be able to – do you want me to try?"

"Yes – tell him what's happened. Tell him he needs to get up here as soon as possible. I need him to wave his badge around and bully Mabbut into releasing us."

I wasn't sure I'd be able to give a message that detailed, but I closed my eyes and concentrated on trying to find John's mental signature among the many that immediately clamoured for my attention the moment I tuned into them. It took a long time – I hadn't seen John for a few weeks and he was some distance away. I followed numerous white threads before I found the one that led to John, and then it took me a little while to get his attention. I was tired by now, and although I could feel John's thoughts all around me, he didn't seem to notice when I called his name. I concentrated even more, and, suddenly, like a key turning in a lock, I found myself jolted into his body. It was very like the experience with the duck back at the ranch. I was sitting in a dark, basement room, surrounded by papers and filing cabinets. I was writing something; the phone was ringing but I wasn't answering it. I was very tall – it made me giddy to realise I was this tall, this strong, this confident, and I longed suddenly to be grown up, and feel this sure of myself. It's difficult to describe what it's like being in someone else's body; I hadn't displaced John – he was still there, but he wasn't aware of me. I thought about it for a little while, trying to decide how I could get his attention. He was

writing something, and that gave me an idea. I found that if I concentrated very hard, I could make his hand write what I wanted it to. It wasn't easy, and I longed, more than anything else, to just let go and return to my own body, but I knew how much trouble we were in, and the thought of Walter being locked up in a prison cell, parted from me, perhaps forever, upset me so much that it gave me the strength to continue. John wasn't even aware of what was happening; he was on automatic, as so many of us are when we do routine tasks. He glanced up at the clock, and hummed softly to himself as he carried on writing, not realising that he was now spelling out the words that I was forcing his hand to write. It took all my strength to manage seven poorly spelled words: *Walter and William at sherifs offise HELP*. And then John took over again, and continued with what he had been writing. He wrote another few words, and then stopped, and blinked, gazing in disbelief at the page in front of him, where his own adult scrawl suddenly degenerated into the shaky handwriting of a 6 year old child.

"William?" He got up, and looked around.

"John. Help," I whispered, but I was too tired to say any more, and I had no idea whether he heard me. I felt myself slipping away and a little while later I woke up back in my own body.

"William? Are you okay?" Walter said as my eyes blinked open. I gazed around blearily – I had a bad headache and my brain felt fuzzy and tired. "Did it work?" Walter asked, and I shrugged.

"I don't know. I think so," I whispered. It felt strange being back in my own body, and I began to shiver, worn out by the exertion and emotion of all that had happened. "Uncle Walter please don't let them take me away. Please," I begged, holding onto him. There is something solidly reassuring about Uncle Walter. Everything about him was familiar – the tense set of his broad shoulders, the slight rasp of his cheek against mine, the strong, clean smell of his cologne combined with the scent of the man himself. He was my rock, and I clung to him.

"William – I'll do everything I can. I promise," he told me, sitting down on the bed so that I could clamber onto his lap to be held. "And if we do get separated it won't be for long. John or Mulder or Monica will find you and then they'll rescue me."

"I don't want us to be separated," I wailed, latching on to that part of what he had said and ignoring the rest.

"William, we know each other too well to really be separated," Walter reassured me. "They can put us on opposite sides of the world, but you'd still be able to hear me, and feel me – wouldn't you?"

This was true – it had taken me some time to find John but I knew Walter so well, was so familiar with his soul, that we were connected on a different level entirely. He was right – we could never truly be separated.

"Remember when your other father – when Nathaniel sent me away," Walter told me, still holding me close. "I didn't go far, William, and you could easily find me."

I nodded, feeling comforted. My head still ached and I was desperately tired.

"Tell me how you found John," Walter asked and I told him what I'd done, and how I'd written the message to John using his own hand. He nodded approvingly, but he still looked anxious.

"I wish I knew what Mabbut wants. I thought at first he just wanted to make a name for himself by solving your parents' murders but if he really believed I was involved in that he would have separated us immediately..." He shook his head, his arms wrapped very firmly around me as he spoke of that terrible night. "But...why did he test us with that magnetite? He's acting as if he's a one man band out here, almost as if he thinks he's outside the law. Even by detaining us here he's acting unlawfully which he wouldn't do that unless he was very sure of his information – or very desperate."

I had no idea why the sheriff would be desperate, but I liked hearing the rumbling sound of Uncle Walter's voice so I just rested my head against his shoulder and listened. A couple of hours passed and then I sat upright with a start.

"Uncle Walter – John is very close...and so is Monica," I whispered. Walter nodded, and held me tight, and he put his head on one side, trying to hear what might be happening outside our small cell. I could hear what wasn't audible to his ears and I related what was going on.

"John is arguing with the sheriff. He has some papers and he's waving his badge around but the sheriff won't agree to let him see us. He's...oh..."

"What?" Walter asked, anxiously.

"Monica just appeared behind the sheriff. She told him she's tired of arguing. She has a gun! She's pointing it to the back of his head...they're coming this way now..."

We got up, and a couple of minutes later there was the sound of a key in the lock, and then Mabbut came into the room, closely followed by Monica, her gun still drawn. John pushed the sheriff aside and ran into the room.

"Are you two okay? William? Are you okay?" He reached out and grabbed my upper arms, looking deep into my eyes, his own full of a kind of wonder.

"You got my message?" I said, delighted.

"Yeah. It was one of the freakiest experiences of my entire life," John grinned. "One minute I was writin' up a report, and the next I was reading somethin' I knew I hadn't written. Now what the hell happened here?"

"He happened," Walter said gruffly, nodding his head in the direction of the sheriff and taking a threatening step towards him.

"Now slow down here," the sheriff said. "This isn't what you think..."

"I have no idea what I think this is," Walter snapped. "I just know that I'm really mad right now, Mabbut. Imprisoning me is one thing – but keeping the boy locked up is something else. What the hell is going on?"

"I did it for your own safety! I needed to take the fingerprint test to be sure that you're who I think you are – Mr. Walter Skinner." Mabbut rocked back on his heels and waited for the implications of that comment to sink in. Walter's jaw did a sideways clench. "I'm not your enemy," Mabbut said urgently. "I want to help. I know people who can help. We all want to help protect the boy."

Walter turned to John. "Bring him with us – I think it's time to return his hospitality with some of our own," he muttered grimly, striding towards the cell door with me in his arms.

We took the sheriff back to my father's house under armed escort, bundled him into the library, and then gathered around, gazing at him expectantly.

"Walter, William looks beat – d'you think we should put him to bed before we talk to this guy?" John asked. Walter looked down at me, and then across to Monica, before shaking his head.

"No. He'd only stay awake listening; from now on I think we should include William in everything that happens that concerns him. He only listens in when we try to exclude him in any case."

John nodded, and Walter sat me down on the couch and then sat down beside me.

"Okay, buddy, you've got some explaining to do," John said, sitting down opposite the sheriff and pointing his gun loosely at the other man.

"Forgive me, Adam," the sheriff said, in a whisper, directing his apology to me, and bowing his head in my direction. "I'm sorry – I hoped it might be you, but I had to be sure."

"What the hell is goin' on here?" John asked, looking as bewildered as we all felt.

"I don't want for you to distrust me but I had to do the checks. I have to be careful. So many people aren't what they seem these days. You've noticed that, haven't you?" He looked at us pleadingly, and Monica lowered her gun fractionally.

"Yes, we've noticed," she said softly.

"Did you think other people hadn't noticed too, ordinary folk like me? Did you think it was only you people who realised that something was going on?" Mabbut shook his head. "It first started happening a few years ago – people I've known for years just changed overnight – and some people...some people we buried...came back." The sheriff's voice was barely above a whisper. "It took us a long time to notice. Usually they surfaced in other places, a long way from where they'd lived – at first I just thought it was a case of mistaken identity, but that was before I was contacted."

"Contacted? By who?" John frowned.

"The Network. They said aliens were coming to take over the world, that people were being brought back to life - not as themselves, but as killing machines. At first I thought they were crazy – spouting all this garbage about UFO's and aliens and colonisation and viruses...but when I thought about all the weird stuff that's been going on...then I wondered if they might

be right. Then..." His voice choked. "Then my brother died – and ten months later they caught him on tape in a parking lot in Boston, killing a man. I knew it wasn't my brother – I saw his body, and I know he was dead – so how could I explain that he was still alive and walking around, doing these terrible things, things he could never have done before?" The sheriff looked at us for confirmation but nobody moved. "I contacted the Network and agreed to work for them. Now, anybody new comes to this town, I check them out. If they're not human they usually run out of town rather than take the test – they're strong bastards. I've shot a few and they just got up and walked away like nothing had happened. Luckily the Network gave us the angel dust and..."

"Angel dust?" Walter interrupted. "You mean that magnetite you sprinkled on us back at the police station?"

"Is that what it is? We call it angel dust – throw it at those bastards and they scream like the devil. That's how we can identify them – it's harmless to humans."

"Did you try contacting the authorities about all this?" John asked, in an angry tone.

The sheriff snorted. "Sure. We tried. Got told we were a bunch of weirdos and y'know, a decade ago I'd have said the same thing myself – it does sound crazy but I've seen the evidence with my own eyes," the sheriff said hoarsely. "Contaminated's what we call it when one of those alien bastards has taken over a human body. This whole town is a Network town – everybody who lives here checks out. Anybody has a personality change and I'm the first person to hear about it. We keep our eyes and ears open around here. There are Network towns all over the country – and more joining us every year."

"How can you tell who is 'contaminated' and who isn't?" Monica asked. "You can't go around sprinkling every newcomer with powdered magnetite."

"No – but there are sensitives who can detect when someone isn't human. There aren't many of them, so they travel from Network town to Network town, pointing out anyone who isn't one of us. One of them is very gifted – we thought at first that he was the Adam Kasia but he told us he wasn't. He was just a precursor – kind of like John the Baptist was for Christ."

I could see that my friends were uncomfortable with the biblical allusion but I was more interested in this other person the Sheriff had mentioned – the one who was like me. I longed to meet him.

"Then, a couple of years ago, I got to hear about the little boy," Mabbut nodded at me, "at one of our meetings; they told us there was a prophecy, that Adam Kasia was coming."

"Who's this Adam Kasia you keep talkin' about?" John questioned.

"He's the resurrector, the summoner - the one who'll save us."

"Not the Saoshyant?" Monica frowned.

"There are many different names for him, but it all boils down to the same thing." The sheriff shrugged. "He's going to save us from the aliens. That's what he was born for."

"He's just a child," Walter snapped.

"A special child. The Network told us that a super soldier had tracked Adam Kasia down and killed the folks who were looking after him. We were warned to watch out for him, and protect him if he came into our area. I read about that poor family being killed and their son going missing so I was pretty sure he was Adam Kasia – hell, he was even called Adam."

"Adam Kasia." Monica flicked through a couple of the books she had looked in to find out more about the 'Saoshyant'. Okay, got it." She glanced up and then began to read out what she had found. *"Adam Kasia ('the hidden Adam') also known as the first Adam. A god-like form which unites in itself microcosm and macrocosm. This form was regarded as, at one and the same time, the soul of the corporeal Adam and as the soul of every man. Adam Kasia is a redeemer and is himself redeemed."* She looked at me. "Does this mean anything to you, William?"

I shook my head, feeling strange, just as I had when I had heard her read about the Saoshyant. "I'm just me!" I protested. "I'm not a micro – micro-comic or whatever that means."

"It's okay, William. It doesn't matter." Monica smiled at me but her eyes were thoughtful.

"How did you know we were here?" Walter asked the sheriff.

"When you folks came to town it didn't take long for it to filter back to me. Took awhile before we heard there was a child living here, but once I heard that, I knew it was time to pay you folks a visit. Forgive me, but I figured that if you were who I thought you were then you'd be safer if I took you to my office while I checked you out."

"Safer? With just you to protect us?" Walter snapped.

"Me and the whole Network. I put out the word that I had you."

"Oh great. Fucking great." John stood up and ran a hand through his hair. "Now half the country knows where we are."

"Now you can be protected," the sheriff corrected him. "No harm will come to this child with us looking after you."

"Who said we wanted your help?" Walter asked.

"You've got it whether you want it or not. He doesn't just belong to you. He's the world's child. He's going to save us all," the sheriff replied.

There was silence for awhile as that sank in.

"The world's child – that's what Mulder called him back at the cabin," Walter said softly.

"It's what he is," the sheriff said. "It's exactly what he is."

"He's also just a little boy," Walter said firmly. "A little boy under my personal protection."

"We want to protect him too," Sheriff Mabbut said vehemently. "All we want to do is help."

So, that was how we became involved with the Network. John, Walter and Monica talked it through for some time, but in the end, they agreed to accept the sheriff's offer of help. In truth, we had no choice. The sheriff was right; there were too many people interested in me and while half the world it seemed wanted to kill me, the other half wanted to protect me. Both of them, though, were interested in me for the same reason: it seemed that somehow, and nobody was entirely sure how, I was going to save the world.

People often ask me about the prophecies; there seem to be a hundred or more different names for me in different cultures; Saoshyant and Adam Kasia are just two of them – I've been called many others. World's child is what stuck though, and is unique in being totally new, not steeped in ancient prophecy. I guess that's why I like it best as well. The others carry such a weight of tradition and expectation with them. People always want the other answers too – the ones I cannot give them; the ones about life after death and where we came from and all the other teeming questions that are central to humankind's great search for knowledge. I wish I knew those answers but I don't. I only know what I am – I don't know why, or how and that's enough for me. It always was. Unlike my father I never had a restless, questing soul. I always accepted what destiny had in store for me without any sense of surprise. I simply am, and, I believe that, after all this time, even my father has finally accepted that.

Speaking of my father, he turned up a few nights later, with a bruised jaw, a closed eye, and his arm hanging by his side at a grotesque angle. Hank's people, who kept a discreet guard on the house day and night, caught him as he staggered from his car and up the driveway to the front door.

There was commotion all around, as the Network people guarding us scattered their powdered magnetite liberally over my father, who wondered what the hell was going on and immediately drew his weapon, thinking they might be super soldiers. There was pandemonium all around, with Mulder struggling against his assailants even with his broken arm – and it could have ended very badly if Walter hadn't charged out into the fray, and calmed the situation down with several snapped commands in a very terse voice. The Network people backed off and Uncle Walter gazed down at Mulder where he was lying on the ground, bleeding liberally from the cuts on his face and hands.

"You're a mess," he said with a sigh. He knelt down beside his old friend and touched Mulder's hair gently. The two men looked at each other in silence for a moment, but it was a silence filled with so much communication that it transfixed me. Nobody else could see the flashing lights pulsing back and forth between my father and my Uncle Walter, or hear the crackling of energy in the air around them. They were like two halves of the same energy source, and when they were apart they were diminished somehow; when they were together their energies clashed and sparked and led to those furious arguments I was so used to witnessing between them, but they were infinitely stronger, their energies merging and coalescing into a pulsing, glowing force of pure white beauty. "Come on." Uncle Walter helped Mulder to his feet, and my father swayed, unsteadily. I realised then that it wasn't just his arm that was hurt – one of his legs was unable to support his weight as well. Suddenly, without warning, Uncle Walter gathered my father up, and swung him into his arms.

"Oh for fuck's sake, Walter," Mulder snapped. "I can walk. This is fucking ridiculous."

"Shut up," Walter snapped. "I think you've caused enough commotion for one night."

"I was attacked by those people – oh, and who the hell are those fucking people?" Mulder growled.

"They're protecting us – and if you'd kept in touch or just kept your goddamn cell phone switched on you'd have know that," Walter told him. That was one of the things I liked about Uncle Walter – even when the full force of my father's volatile temper was directed at him he always stood his ground. I suspect that secretly that was one of the things that Mulder liked about Walter too.

Monica pushed the door open and Walter carried Mulder through it, and up the stairs and I could hear them still arguing as they went. Monica turned to me and rolled her eyes.

"Well, I guess we can say goodbye to any peace and quiet now," she murmured, and I giggled as we both followed the two men up the stairs.

"My cell phone and I were forcibly separated from each other a few weeks ago," Mulder was saying as we reached the bedroom. Walter put Mulder gently on the bed, his whole demeanour at odds with the massive argument they were currently having. "I'm SO sorry that I didn't have time to go out shopping for a new phone."

"There are such things as pay phones – remember those? One call wouldn't have killed you," Skinner snapped, as he went into the bathroom to fill a bowl with water and bring a medical kit.

"You still haven't answered my question as to who the hell those people who jumped me were."

"And you still haven't answered my question as to why you find it so damn hard to tell us where you are and what you're doing or just to let us know that you're okay. If you'd called, I could have told you that the house was being guarded."

"I figured that one out the hard way," Mulder growled. "Are you ever going to get around to telling me by who, and why, or are you going to keep boring me to death with the phone issue? Christ, what is this? One kiss and now you're nagging me for not calling you? What next? You cry when I don't take you to the fucking prom?"

There was a deadly silence, and I think Mulder knew he had gone too far. Monica winced, and I made a little face at her. We both knew that last comment would not have gone down well with Walter but Mulder was far too worked up to back down. Walter's jaw was literally snapping with tension.

"Yes, I want to know how you are, that you're still alive. Forgive me for giving a shit but this isn't just about me – there's a little boy who also wants to hear your voice occasionally."

That comment hit home, and all the fight suddenly went out of Mulder. He was silent for a long time, while Walter laid out the medical kit and dunked some cotton balls in the water. Then he sat on the side of the bed, pushed Mulder's hair out of his cut forehead, and proceeded to bathe the wound with infinite care and gentleness. However mad at my father he

might have been, he still took the utmost care of him. Mulder stared stonily into space during Walter's ministrations, wincing occasionally as the blood was slowly cleaned from his face. Walter finished bathing his flesh wounds and then, cautiously, turned his attention to Mulder's arm and ankle. The ankle proved to be merely twisted, and a firm bandage sufficed there, which Walter strapped on with his usual efficiency. It suddenly occurred to me that this was medicine he might have learned in the field, back in Vietnam, but wherever he had learned it, he was both gentle and thorough. He turned, finally, to Mulder's arm. He unwrapped the makeshift splint of magazines and some tape that Mulder had wrapped around the arm, but Mulder howled in pain when Walter tried to pull his sweater over the injury, so Walter called for scissors and cut his sweater off him. Monica and I hovered in the doorway, watching, too uncertain of the mood in the room and Mulder's evident pain to venture any closer. I think we were both extremely grateful that Walter was there to take care of Mulder both physically and emotionally – he was the only one who really knew how to handle my father when he was in this much turmoil.

Walter cut Mulder's sweater away from his injured arm to reveal that it was swollen, misshapen and clearly broken.

"You need a doctor for this," Walter said softly. "I can't fix it."

"Oh great. Where the fuck are we going to get a doctor?" Mulder growled. "I'm not going to a hospital, Walter."

"You won't have to. Hank must know someone who can help," Walter replied.

"Hank? Who the hell is Hank? I go away for a few weeks and when I come back there are goons guarding the front door and you're friends with someone called Hank?" Mulder snapped.

"Yup. That about sums it up." Walter smiled pleasantly, and dried his hands on the towel before reaching for his cell phone. Mulder stopped his hand before it got to the phone.

"You do it," he said.

"Mulder, I can't – it would mean manipulating the arm and it'll cause you a lot of pain. If I screw it up then I might cause even more damage."

"Have you ever set a bone before?" Mulder asked, his good hand still clutched tight around Walter's wrist. Walter hesitated, and then his eyes narrowed.

"Yes. Yes I have," he said.

"Then do it," Mulder ordered.

"The last bone I set was thirty years ago in Vietnam," Walter told Mulder in a steady, even tone of voice that hid a multitude of emotions. "My friend Doug had a broken leg and we were still miles from camp. The phones were down and I couldn't call for a chopper. I needed to get him walking, so I twisted his tibia back into place and tied a makeshift splint around it...but I will never, ever forget the sound he made when I set his leg. He screamed like a wild animal, and he writhed under me as if I was killing him. I won't listen to you screaming

like that unless there's no other option and there is another option so I'm taking it," Walter said tersely.

Mulder stared at him, and then, finally, without saying a word, released his grip on Walter's arm. Walter made a call to Hank, and within half an hour there was a knock at the door and a few seconds after that Monica escorted a thin, nervous looking man into the room. The doctor took one look at me and made a nervous little bow in my direction – much to Mulder's incredulity.

"You're bowing to my son?" He asked the man, who looked up, startled.

"He's Adam Kasia. The saviour," he whispered. Mulder glanced at Walter who shook his head, warning him to drop the subject.

"Well if you can spare a couple of minutes away from your devotions to see to the saviour's dad then I'd be grateful," Mulder drawled.

The doctor clearly wasn't sure from Mulder's ironic monotones whether he was joking or not – which was a problem we all had at times. He scurried to Mulder's side, took one look at the arm and made some disapproving noises in the back of his throat.

"Don't tell me I should go to the hospital because I'm not fucking going," Mulder snapped.

The doctor nodded, glancing nervously at Uncle Walter who was standing very close with his arms folded over his large chest, looking very threatening.

"He isn't usually this rude. He needs pain killers," Walter said. "Strong ones," he added. The doctor nodded, and got some paraphernalia out of his bag, and Walter went to stand on Mulder's good side. The two exchanged glances, and then Walter, firmly, in a way that allowed for no refusal, took Mulder's good hand in his own.

"You're going to need something to hold onto," he said, but we all knew there was more to the gesture than that.

I couldn't watch what happened next so I buried my face in Monica's tummy, but I couldn't block out the sound of my father's hoarse yell of sheer pain a few minutes later. Monica put her arms around me and stroked my hair and I remained like that for a long time, that scream reverberating around in my head, blocking out all other noise.

"Hey, William." It was my father's voice; strained with his recent ordeal but still him. I looked up, to find him pale beneath his bruises but the light was still there in his hazel eyes. His arm was covered in a fibre glass cast, and there was no sign of the doctor so I don't know how long I had phased out the rest of the world. Mulder was still gripping Walter's hand, but now he slowly unfurled his fingers and held out his hand to me. I saw Walter shake out his own hand, which was covered in a series of tiny red crescent cuts where Mulder's nails had dug into him when he was having his arm set. I crept, cautiously, over to the bed. I could still feel Mulder's pain lingering around him, but his smile was welcoming. I climbed onto the bed, snuggled under his good arm, and put my arms around him, resting my head on his chest.

"Don't go away again," I told him. "Don't get hurt again, Mulder. I hate it when you're hurt." His hand squeezed my shoulder.

"Hey, I'm fine, William," he whispered hazily. The painkillers were clearly doing their job and the aura of pain around him was dissipating leaving a sleepy atmosphere instead. "I'm sorry, William," he whispered. "I'm back now though and..." He hesitated. "And I missed you, kid. How are you doing?"

"Walter and I got arrested," I told him conversationally, glancing up at him.

"That's my boy," Mulder grinned tiredly. "Like father like son, huh?"

I giggled, remembering all those stories Walter had told me about how Agent Mulder was always getting himself into trouble. Walter laughed too, and hugged us, his big arm somehow managing to capture both of us in its embrace.

"Are you going to tell us what happened, Mulder?" He said. "Or do you want to get some rest?"

"No. I want to be with you guys. I've been alone for weeks. It's nice to have company." He smiled at us. Monica, standing by the door, cleared her throat.

"I'm going to go after the doctor and check the care instructions and the meds," she said, and then discreetly left the room.

"So, how did you end up like this?" Walter asked, gesturing to Mulder's many injuries.

"I got into a fight with a super soldier. Needless to say, he won."

"What about the magnetite bullets? Didn't they protect you?" Walter asked. Mulder pulled a face.

"Up to a point – but...although he sure as hell backed off when I shot him, he didn't stay down for long. Remember Billy? He screamed a lot when I shot him, but there was no body when I went back so the bullets don't kill them."

"Maybe bullets aren't the best way of fighting them," I murmured. Walter and Mulder both looked at me. "They might hurt them, but maybe...it's the wrong way to use magnetite?" I suggested. "Kind of like Hank's angel dust – they don't like it, but it doesn't kill them."

"That's a pretty astute observation, William," Walter commented.

"Yeah. The problem is, William, that you need a whole quarry of magnetite to have any real impact on the super soldiers," Mulder sighed. "We all carry magnetite around with us as a way of defending ourselves but really all it does it give us time to escape. I got the bullets made because I thought they might work, but they're just doing more of the same – slowing the super soldiers down but nothing more. It's a good weapon to keep them away while we're running but if we ever have to turn and fight them, well..." He shrugged. "I haven't given up on them though. I'm going to work on refining them."

"Did you find anything?" Walter asked.

"Not much. I found some more on those prophecies – I was going to tell you, but I guess you know already, that saoshyant isn't the only name the prophecies have for William. It's the one that the super soldiers use, but there are plenty of others floating around, including the one the doctor just used, Adam Kasia."

"Why is it the one the super soldiers use?" I asked, curious about this topic. Mulder exchanged a glance with Walter, who shrugged.

"I told him we'd keep him informed of anything that involved him," he said. "He knows he's not like other kids his age but that doesn't mean that you're not still a kid, monster," he said tickling me. I giggled and snuggled up close to him and my father, loving being this close to them, and loving that they were together again, which, to my mind was where they belonged. I could sense a feeling of surprise emanating from Mulder - surprise that this felt so good.

"I'm not sure why the super soldiers call you saoshyant but I have an idea," he said slowly. "Remember I said that these prophecies might all date back to the time of a great flood – a flood that's mentioned in every culture in the world. In the bible it's told in the story of Noah's Ark." I smiled. I liked the story of Noah's Ark. Something about all the animals and people in the world being saved from destruction appealed to me. "Now, I'm hypothesising that the flood is an explanation of what happened to the world in the aftermath of the battle with the aliens..." Mulder's eyes were alight as he spoke and I dreamily connected with the sheer mental energy pouring forth from him. He might have been a little delirious and out of his mind on pain meds, but this was something that he lived, breathed, drank and ate. He loved this kind of stuff! "And the legends all talk of a ship that saved the world; it's common knowledge that ship came to rest on Mount Ararat, in Turkey."

"Hold on a second. You're saying that Noah's Ark was a spaceship?" Walter asked, disbelievingly.

"Not just any spaceship – our ancestors' mothership," Mulder replied. "Now, Turkey is on the borders of Iran, Iraq and Armenia, the region where Zoroastrianism arose, and the saoshyant is a Zoroastrian concept. I believe the super soldiers are following a prophecy that originates more or less at that source – the mothership itself."

"Okay," Walter said easily, "but we should all bear in mind that you're drugged up to the eyeballs right now."

"You're saying that I make more sense than this when I'm not?" Mulder grinned and Walter laughed.

Most of Mulder's explanation meant nothing to me, but it was so nice being cuddled up between him and Walter that I wasn't really listening. I let my mind wander, and followed a small white thread that led to a tiny beetle that was trying to crawl into a small gap between the floorboards. I was vaguely aware that Mulder had stopped talking and that Walter was quiet as well, and then, Mulder lifted his good hand and gently touched Walter's arm, where it was resting on Mulder's shoulders.

"I'm sorry. About earlier," he whispered.

"You were in pain," Walter shrugged.

"Yeah, but even so..." There was another long silence. "Walter, what happened to Doug?" He asked. Walter gave a little smile.

"He made it. I got him back to camp and they shipped him off to Saigon for treatment. I see him every veteran's day and every year he tells me the same story about how his leg is mostly fine but he always knows when there's a storm brewing as it starts to ache."

Mulder gave a little smile. He looked infinitely weary, but happy.

"There's so much about you that I don't know. Whole huge chunk of your life before we even met," he murmured. "You know everything about me."

"Not everything." Walter shook his head.

"Well all the bad stuff anyway," Mulder said, stroking Walter's hand absently.

"Yeah," Walter chuckled. "And the good too...although I think I should point out that if anyone's gonna be the prom queen in this relationship it has to be you."

Mulder snorted out loud. "I guess I deserved that," he muttered.

I was distracted at that moment by the appearance of three strangers in the room. I was familiar with Luke, Samantha and Emily but I hadn't seen these guys before. One of them, a small man with glasses, wearing an ill-fitting black leather jacket, went and peered at Mulder suspiciously. The others hung back, watching.

"What's up with him?" the little man asked.

"He's okay now. He got into a fight with a super soldier," I told him. "But he's fine now. The doctor came and fixed him."

"William, who are you talking to?" Walter asked, his voice breaking into my conversation.

"Uh, there are three men here asking about Mulder," I said, glancing up.

"Three...? What do they look like?" Mulder asked.

I gazed at them. One of them had long blond hair and an equally long nose while the other one had a brown beard and was wearing a fussy kind of suit.

"They look...weird," I said.

"Oh gee, great," the blond one said. "Thanks, kid."

"Sorry." I grinned at him sheepishly.

"There's three of them and they look weird? They have to be the gunmen," Mulder said.

"He's a fine one to talk – he looks like death on toast right now," the little dark man commented with a sniff. I giggled.

"One of them..." I searched my mind for a name. "Froghickey...? He says you look like death on toast," I told my father and he gave a bark of laughter.

"Yup that sounds like Frohike. Hey, guys, what are you doing here?" He asked, looking straight at the little man. I realised that, perhaps because of the pain medication he was on, my father could see our visitors – not as clearly as I could, but he could definitely make out their hazy outlines.

"We heard you were suffering, man. Thought we'd check in, see if you were okay," the blond one – Langly? – said.

"We didn't mean to disturb anyone," the other one, Byers, interjected hurriedly, his eyes sweeping over the cosy bedroom scene, with Walter cradling both me and Mulder under one big arm. I relayed the message to my father who didn't seem to be able to hear our visitors and he waved his good arm lazily, and then put his hand back over Walter's hand. Walter watched the whole thing through slightly amazed, somewhat wary eyes but he didn't say anything.

"You're welcome, guys," Mulder drawled, "but I have to tell you that you're a bit late. All the drama's over now."

"I told you," Byers said to Frohike. "I said we should have come right away."

"We didn't know it was serious," Frohike replied, rolling his eyes. "We thought you were making a fuss about nothing – and look, the guy's fine. We probably shouldn't even have come."

"He's glad you did," I told them conspiratorially. Mulder was fast fading into sleep, utterly exhausted by his injuries and the pain meds he was on.

"So, you're the kid, huh?" Frohike leaned forward and gazed at me intently. "You don't look much but I guess you'll do." I grinned at him, and he grinned back.

"Catch you later, half pint," he said. "We should be going." And with that, they all disappeared.

I was about to tell Mulder that they'd gone, in case he hadn't realised, only to see that he was asleep.

"Ssh." Walter put his finger over his lips. "We should let him get some rest," he whispered. "And it's time you were in bed anyway." I nodded, and, very solemnly, kissed my father good night. Walter smiled, and I kissed him too and then crept out of the room. I paused in the doorway and looked back – to see Uncle Walter gently smoothing my father's hair. Then he leaned over, and deposited the most gentle of kisses on Mulder's lips. I smiled as the white threads connecting them collided in a spectacular fashion, fizzing into a beautiful display, just as they had last time they'd kissed on the lips.

I went to bed happily enough, and Uncle Walter soon came in to tuck me in. After he had gone I lay awake, feeling all tingly because my father had come back to us. I found I needed less and less sleep as I got older. I valued my time alone, and often used the time to explore my senses, or go for little out of body excursions. Not tonight though – tonight I was troubled by something that went around and around inside my head. It occurred to me that I had seen the three men that Mulder called the 'gunmen' because they had been close to Mulder in life and were worried about him so they had turned up to check that he was okay. I knew Luke appeared because of John, and Samantha wanted to be near Mulder. Emily was a different matter – her connection was with me. So...if Emily had appeared to be near me, and if it wasn't only children I could see, why hadn't I seen my mother? Why hadn't she appeared to me the same way Emily had? Ever since I had shared my father's memories of her back at the cabin, I had been consumed with curiosity about my mother. I might not have known her for very long, but I loved her fiercely and I had spent a great deal of my time since leaving the cabin thinking about her, wondering if she was happy where she was now, worrying about how she had died, and whether she was proud of me - in short, I had become obsessed with her. I hadn't mentioned this preoccupation to anyone – I didn't want to worry Uncle Walter or Monica, and it would have been absolutely impossible to say anything to Mulder. He was still so sensitive on the subject of my mother, and I knew that his loss was at least as great as my own. Still, I longed to soak up more memories of her from him, and I replayed those he had shared, over and over again so that I was completely familiar with every single nuance of how she spoke and smelled, and laughed and cried. I knew every little thing about her, but I couldn't touch her or speak to her and that upset me.

"Why don't you come to see me?" I whispered into the air. "Why?" But there was no reply. I fantasised that she might still be alive and that explained her absence. Maybe one day I'd find her again, and I knew that when finally we were reunited, and she held me in her arms, I would be happier than I had ever been in my entire life.

I woke the next day to the sound of my father and Uncle Walter arguing. This seemed to be a pattern of their lives – only when my father was completely wrung out, either emotionally or physically, did he let Walter past his defences to see the love he had for the big man, which he kept locked up inside as if it were a deadly secret or something to be ashamed of. Last night they had shared a tender conversation and had kissed, but this morning Mulder had scuttled back into his defensive shell, and he was making it clear that it was business as usual.

"And you just took this Mabbut guy at face value?" Mulder was saying incredulously and I guessed that Uncle Walter had finally told him about the Network and how they came to be guarding the house. "Christ, Walter, why not just invite anyone off the street and tell them all our secrets?"

"They already knew our secrets and we didn't have a whole lot of choice about letting them into our lives," Walter replied, his own tone less furious, more weary, as if he had anticipated this particular battle.

"Who the hell are these people?"

"They're just that, people – ordinary people. Did you think that you were the only one who knew what was going on? Didn't you think it was at least possible that some of the other people on this planet might have figured out what was happening? There are all the prophecies for a start, and..."

"I don't like it," Mulder interrupted. "I don't trust them."

"They want to help. They are helping. You saw that doctor last night – they worship William."

"Well all that bowing isn't any good for the kid," Mulder snapped. "I can't stand these kinds of crazies, Walter. They always have their own agenda. Right now they want to protect William but as we get closer to whatever is going to happen, maybe they'll decide they need more control over him."

"Nobody is going to take William away from us, Mulder," Walter chided. "You're just being paranoid as usual."

"I have to be fucking paranoid! You don't fucking understand. I've lost everyone, Walter, everyone."

"You haven't lost me," Walter told him steadily. "And you're not going to lose William."

"How do you know that?" Mulder's voice was taut with pain.

"Because, you idiot, William wouldn't allow that," Walter said, his voice gentle, and even a little amused.

"William's just a kid!" Mulder protested.

"A very powerful kid," Walter replied. "And getting more powerful every day. They might try to steal him away, Mulder, but I don't think they'd succeed. There's nowhere they could take him that we couldn't find him. I have to tell you about this amazing thing he did with John when Mabbut took us to his office..."

Their voices faded, coming in and out of focus and I relaxed, realising that the arguing was over - for now. Walter seemed to know how to defuse Mulder when he was at his worst. I think he understood that most of Mulder's volatility was a cover to hide the depth of his real feelings, which scared him with their intensity. Mulder hadn't ever looked for love, or any kind of emotional connection with other people. His childhood had been an emotional wilderness and it always astonished him that anyone should want to love him. Then both my mother and Walter had got in under his radar. My mother's death had hurt him to the core, and he was alternately pushing Walter away and offering him ways in, trying to protect himself from hurt at the same time as craving the love he feared would end up causing him pain. I felt for him and his predicament, but until he faced up to those emotions I knew this endless pattern of arguing and rapprochement would continue, the blazing rows punctuated by moments of such intense tenderness that they made up for everything else. Walter, endlessly patient as always, seemed content to just ride out the Mulder storm, clinging to the mast in the hope that one day the storm would abate, and they could sail on gentler seas together.

My father was in some pain for the next few days, which made him irritable – he was the world's worst patient and there were times when his frustration with his physical condition

spilled over. As usual, most of his anger was directed at himself, and occasionally at Uncle Walter. He never lost his temper with me, and I quickly took to spending days sitting on the end of his bed, loving the sound of his voice and coming to learn the scent of him, and the unique mental signature he projected. Uncle Walter's words the previous night had impressed me with the need to be able to reach the people I loved most in the world, even if we were separated, so, to that end, I projected my thoughts out every day to touch them, and even to try and converse with them. It was easy enough to find Mulder, although his emotions were usually too intense for him to hear me, but he pulsed brighter than the aura of any other person I ever met. He shone with silvers and golds, lacking the darker, earthier tones that streaked Uncle Walter's aura.

My father is not a man who should be confined in small spaces and he had no patience with the limitations of his own body. Mulder's hatred of his condition had hardened into something else – something akin to hatred of himself. I picked up on this whenever I sat with him. He hated so much about himself, and his lame, weak, injured body just served to intensify that hatred. Unwittingly, I was the architect for his feelings coming to a head, and exploding. I spent most days sitting with him, and, to my shame, my obsession with my mother had reached the stage where I rifled through his memories without asking him, looking for little snapshots of her that could feed my desire for knowledge about this tantalising woman I had never known but wanted to, so badly. I know it was a terrible thing to do, especially to someone as locked up in his own pain and grief as Mulder and I honestly didn't mean to do it. It happened almost by accident. I saw Mulder gazing out of the window, and caught a glimpse of a memory of a red curtain of hair, shining in the sunlight. Intrigued, and knowing the memory concerned my mother, I found myself slipping into his mind to explore the memory further – and then I encountered other memories, and, guiltily, I started sifting through them. I had never been able to do this before – or maybe this particular talent was one that had never been of interest to me before – but now I found it was easy to literally just browse through another person's memory, looking at the books in a library. I don't think Mulder even knew I was doing it, but of course the whole process of me looking for memories of my mother, made him relive those memories too, but I was so wrapped up in my own enjoyment that I didn't notice his growing sense of unhappiness.

By the time Walter came in an hour or two later with a bowl of soup for the invalid, Mulder was already on a knife-edge. Walter put the bowl down on the nightstand and reached out to help Mulder to sit up so that he could eat more easily... and Mulder went ballistic. It seemed to come out of the blue, but I knew the roots of it. To Walter though, it must have been a complete shock. Mulder pushed Walter's hands away and the soup went flying.

"Don't fucking touch me," my father growled.

"Okay." Walter drew back holding up his hands in a calming gesture. "What's going on?" He asked carefully. "Mulder...? What's happening here?"

"Just...don't..." Mulder snapped, breathing heavily. I understood what he was going through, and felt terrible.

"Uncle Walter... it's my fault. I just wanted to see memories of my mother," I whispered. "I'm sorry, Mulder. I'm so sorry."

Mulder frowned, not understanding what I was saying but Walter did.

"Are you telling me that you've been making him relive his memories of Dana?" He asked, a dark look in his eyes. I flinched. I remembered that time with the duck, and the look of disappointment in his eyes. I never wanted to see that again.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't think...I wanted to see her so much."

Walter's expression changed into one of compassion and he sighed. "It's okay, William. I'll deal with Mulder. Why don't you go and have your lunch with Monica, huh?" I nodded, and scrambled out of the room, but I felt so terrible that I didn't go downstairs to see Monica. Instead I sat on the top step and listened in on what was happening in the other room.

"Did you hear that, Mulder?" Walter asked gently, going to stand by the window. He flicked the curtain aside and looked out. "William misses Scully too. We all do."

"I...you don't understand," Mulder whispered, almost tonelessly. "When I'm with you, I want to be with you...I want to touch you, and be close to you, Walter...but it seems like a betrayal of Scully and what we had together. I feel like I'm cheating on her, or abandoning her, Walter, and I hate myself so much."

"Mulder, there are some things we all have to live with. Things we don't like about ourselves, or our lives – things we really wish had never happened. You loved Scully and it's okay to grieve for her. Did you ever really give yourself the chance to do that? It seems to me that you were so hell bent on vengeance and on getting to William and keeping him safe, that you never really grieved for Scully."

I knew that Mulder's face was as white as snow. He wasn't physically crying but his whole body seemed convulsed by pain.

"It isn't betrayal, Mulder," Walter whispered softly. "D'you think Scully would want you to wear a hair shirt for the rest of your life, and beat yourself up continuously about her death? You know she wouldn't."

Mulder nodded, his face set like granite. Walter left the window and walked silently over to the bed. He sat down, put his arm around Mulder, and pulled him close. Mulder went, unresisting. Walter rested his head against Mulder's and they sat there, their heads touching, for a long time. Neither spoke, or cried, or laughed. They just sat. I felt a lump rise in my throat as I wondered whether my father would ever outdistance his demons for long enough to stop living with the failures and perceived failures of his past, and wake up to the happiness that was standing right next to him, if he'd only look. Walter was so steadfast, such a rock – he took care of all of us. Who, I wondered, took care of Uncle Walter?

As I had suspected, I didn't get away with my unauthorised browsing through Mulder's memories. Uncle Walter came to see me later that day, when Mulder's mood had settled. I was waiting for him in the library, flicking listlessly through a book that Monica had been teaching me how to read. Uncle Walter came and sat down beside me and I bit on my lip and felt myself starting to tremble. I hardly dared look into his eyes because I knew he was disappointed in me.

"William," he said, his tone more gentle than I had been expecting. I gathered all my courage and looked at him. His dark eyes were concerned and speculative but I was relieved to see that there was no disappointment.

"I'm so sorry, Uncle Walter," I whispered. "Is Mulder okay now? Can I see him?"

"He's sleeping. Maybe later," Walter said. I nodded. "William – you're a remarkable boy," Walter began and I bit on my lip again, aware that a lecture of some sort was coming. I was unused to being scolded because the honest truth was that I rarely did anything wrong. I was always far too anxious to please, and I was so tuned in to the emotions and thought patterns of the people around me that the last thing I would have wanted to do was to hurt them in any way. Their pain would have been my pain, and their anger towards me too much to bear. That was partly why I was feeling so wretched – I knew just how much my father was hurting, and how hard it had been for Walter to calm him down and comfort him.

"I won't do anything like that ever again," I blurted to Uncle Walter. "I hate that I upset Mulder so much. If there's anything I can do to make it better..."

"Hush. It's okay." Uncle Walter put a hand on my shoulder and gazed into my eyes. "It's okay, William. Mulder will be fine. Maybe these were memories and emotions he had to face – maybe what you did was a good thing, in the long run. However..." I scrunched my face up, sure that I was going to cry. "You have powers that we don't really understand or know how to deal with," Walter continued. "That's been fine up 'til now because you've been so comfortable with them that there hasn't really been a problem. But...the incident today, and a few weeks ago in this room with me and Monica, makes me think that you need some guidance, William." I nodded, because he was right. "You're so knowing, so incredibly aware, that we tend to forget that you're only a child. The way you talk, the things you sense, the abilities you have...it's only when I see your handwriting, or when you ask me to tuck you in bed at night and tell you stories, that I remember just how young you are. You need our protection in many ways, William, not just physically. We're your guardians – we have to raise you in a way that will keep you happy and safe." I was suddenly aware of how very small I was, sitting next to him on the couch, my feet ending somewhere level with his shins, my head level with his chest. "So, I'm going to sit with you for an hour or so every day and we'll explore your senses together. I want you to tell me if you discover any new ones, and also if any of your existing abilities develop and expand. I'll keep a record of it in a diary so we can both measure how you're progressing. I want you to be completely honest with me, William – there's no need to hide anything that you can do. Hiding might be dangerous – it might hurt the people you care about."

I gazed at him, reassured beyond belief by his calm, measured response to what had happened and his suggestion for how we deal with it.

"Thanks...thank you. It's scary, sometimes, what I can do. Talking would help a lot," I whispered.

"Good. Then just let me know if you want to discuss anything - any time – not just during the hour we spend exploring your talents but any time at all, day or night. Now, I need you to promise me you won't look inside people's heads unless they've given you permission. Memories are very personal things, William. If someone wants to share then that's one thing – but you don't take without asking. Understood?"

I nodded, dumbly, suddenly appreciating the full extent of my violation of Mulder's privacy.

"We're in an unusual situation in that there's a lot of bad folks out there who want to find us...so for the moment, I'm just asking you to confine that rule to people you know to be your friends, like me, Mulder, Monica, and John. Everyone else – respect their privacy as much as possible, but not if it means endangering yourself or us. I know that's a fine line to walk, but I think you're responsible enough to understand it. Okay?"

His dark eyes were very solemn and I felt completely contrite.

"Okay," I whispered.

"Good boy."

I peeked up at him to find that he was smiling, and I realised that the lecture was over. Utterly relieved, I flung myself into his arms and he hugged me, laughing at me.

"Hey, it's okay!" he said, kissing my head.

"I don't like it when you're angry with me," I told him.

"I'm not," he told me, gently but firmly. "William – you're curious about your mother, that's natural enough. Do you want to talk to me about that?"

I nodded, tears pricking the back of my eyes, and then it all came out – how I loved her even though I had barely known her, how I longed to hear her and see her and touch her, how I wanted her to hold me in her arms so that I could smell her apple-scented hair and hear her beautiful voice, and, most of all, how much I missed her.

Walter held me throughout my long, sobbing, barely comprehensible speech, not interrupting me. When, finally, I'd finished, he rocked me in his arms until my tears subsided. Then he spoke.

"I'm sorry, William. I'm so sorry. I want to tell you something I've never told anyone before." He paused and stroked my hair affectionately and then took a deep breath and continued. "My own mother died when I was about your age. That was one of the reasons why I asked Mulder to let me be the one to watch over you at the Granger place. When my mother died, it was a different generation. Nobody even told me she was sick – she had cancer, but people didn't talk about things like that when I was a kid. She just got thinner and thinner and one day she went away. My father didn't even tell me she was dead. He just said she wouldn't be coming back and after that we were never allowed to talk about her. I spent years wondering where she was and whether one day I'd see her again. It took me a long time to realise that she had died, and not just gone away. I'll never forget the day I realised she wasn't coming back – I was sitting in school and the teacher was telling us about a famous author who'd died of cancer... she told us how he got thinner and thinner and then he died. I realised that was what happened to my mother. I never trusted my father after that. That was one of the reasons why I upped and enlisted for Vietnam on my 18th birthday..." He paused, and shook his head, realising he'd gotten off the subject, but I was fascinated – I loved hearing about his past. "When I came out to the ranch, I knew it was a different situation for

you because you'd been with Dana for such a short period of time," Walter continued. "But I knew that one day somebody would have to tell you that she was dead – and I wanted it to be me, because I knew the wrong way of doing it and I hoped I'd find a better way. I knew I couldn't spare you the pain of it, William, but I wanted to be there to help you through it because nobody was there for me."

I gazed at him, utterly distracted from my own grief by what he was saying. So much of Uncle Walter's personality fell into place for me in that moment. He was so big, and could be so strong, so much the warrior, that it was easy for people to misjudge him, and they frequently did. Yet underneath he had an empathy for other people's pain because he had been hurt so badly himself when he was a child, and he had never forgotten how that felt. No wonder he was always taking care of people – nobody had taken care of him when he needed them most, and he wanted to make sure that the people he loved didn't suffer the same way. I loved him even more for that.

Mulder gradually got better over the next few weeks, and when he was fully recovered he became his old quicksilver, restless self again. He played baseball with me and Walter in the yard to burn off some of his excess energy, and nagged Uncle Walter for days on end to buy a basketball hoop so that we could shoot some hoops together. His questing nature meant that he found it hard to be inactive, and he spent long nights in the library looking through books, or using the internet to research all the names for me that kept cropping up in the prophecies. He became our resident expert on the mythology surrounding the saoshyant, Adam Kasia, and all the other prophecies that told of the coming of a saviour.

For the first few weeks he argued with Walter almost constantly about the presence of the Network in our lives. He hated that other people were involved because he trusted virtually nobody. It had taken him a long time to fully trust Walter, Monica and John, and he didn't extend that circle of trust easily. He disliked the feeling of being watched and guarded, but the Network did keep a discreet distance – although whether that was to their credit or because Uncle Walter had warned Hank Mabbut to keep out of sight or risk Mulder uprooting us all one dark night, I don't know.

As it turned out, we had cause to be grateful to the Network several times over the next few years. I had one birthday in Mulder's house, and then, out of the blue, the Network got word that a group of aliens and a whole squad of super soldiers had tracked us down and were on their way – there would be too many for us to fight using the angel dust. The Network had prepared for this eventuality, in consultation with Mulder, Walter, Monica and John, and we were hurriedly moved on to another town, several hundred miles away. Hank came with us; he acted as our liaison with the Network during our years on the run and I grew to like him, despite the unfortunate circumstances of our first meeting.

After that, we moved on regularly, every few weeks, going from one small Network town to another. There were little Network towns all over the US – I think even Mulder was surprised by how many of them there were. They were always small – they had to be in order to keep an eye on any newcomers and notice when any of the existing residents changed but this Network of loyal human beings kept us alive, and I will be eternally grateful to them. They were the epitome of the human spirit at its best, and several of them over those few years died protecting us. They were just ordinary people – folks who knew they'd be ridiculed if they

tried to speak of what they knew, but who all the same carried the conviction in their hearts that something very wrong was happening.

The world was changing day by day – aliens and super soldiers were taking the place of people, and as I got older and my powers developed even more, I sensed the essential wrongness of what was happening. It was as if there was a sickness permeating the world, an open wound that grew larger and larger with each passing day. The intricate threads that connected all the life on this planet were disrupted and broken in places, the dances that kept the world turning were still twirling and flowing but now they were interrupted by sudden obstacles, their whirling patterns becoming more and more desperate as they tried to fill the sudden gaps caused by the invasion of an alien energy that destroyed the harmony of the entire world. I found it distressing to watch – I had seen how beautiful it was, and when it was out of sync it hurt, like having a permanent toothache. How long, I wondered, before that ache would spread, until the whole body was diseased, and eventually died? I knew there was a timescale to what would happen, a countdown to my moment of destiny, but I still had no idea what it was I was supposed to do. What use were all my powers? How was I supposed to use them? My father tried frantically to instruct me, to instil in me all the knowledge I'd need, while my Uncle Walter took the view that when the time came, I'd know what to do, acting on those instincts that had carried me through my life thus far. I think, in a way, that they were both right. Whatever the outcome, I knew the date well enough. Mulder had tried to protect my mother from this knowledge, years before, but he had long since given up trying to hide the date since then. An ancient Mayan prophecy, and all the prophecies from the spacecraft, pointed to a year when the great threat would finally explode, and the apocalypse would dawn: 2012.

"How on earth is a 10 or 11 year old boy supposed to save the whole world?" Uncle Walter would say, despairingly, to Mulder during his darker hours. "If only we had more time. If only he had more time," but the truth was that we were in the grip of something far larger than any of us, and we were merely swept up in it, and could only hope that one day all the answers would become clear.

People often ask me how much of what happened was ordained – it's that old, eternal question about fate and free will and I have my own opinion about that; we were all of us born to do our job – Mulder is the archetypal seeker found in so many myths - always looking for answers, for the truth, and it had been he who alerted us to the coming danger. Uncle Walter is the archetypal keeper – the protector, the one who kept me safe. Monica and John and even Hank and many, many others, were all born to fulfil a certain role, as was I, the so-called saviour; the saoshyant or Adam Kasia. My story conformed to many elements of the myth of the saviour; an unusual birth, shrouded in mystery; many obstacles during my infancy and childhood; the possession of unusual talents and abilities – they all fit the stereotype. Beyond that though – well, I believe the fate of the world depended upon us doing those jobs we had been born for, but there was no guarantee that we would, or that we would do them well, or even if we did do them well that we would win. That was down to a combination of luck and our own efforts – there was no destiny about that. Our being born was our destiny – our winning the eventual battle would be entirely a matter of our own guts, determination and ingenuity. As I got older, I came to the chilling conclusion that nothing was pre-ordained; we might lose, and if we did this entire world, this beautiful blue-green orb that I loved so much, would die with us. That thought upset me beyond endurance.

The next few years brought me an increase of my powers but with that came a greater understanding of the task ahead of me, and the responsibilities that rested on my young shoulders, and there were times that I longed for the innocence of my early childhood, sitting in the hired man's room at the ranch, listening to my Uncle Walter's stories.

Over the next few years Uncle Walter's diary charted the incredible explosion of my powers. As it turned out, it was Mulder who usually spent that hour a day exploring my abilities – Uncle Walter tended to just take notes but Mulder was absolutely intrigued by the whole process of my developing powers. I fascinated him, and he liked nothing better than setting me little tests to see whether I could do more one day than I had the day before, measuring the development of my abilities in countless little ways that he'd devised. I'll never forget those sessions, my father's entire body consumed by a lively, excited restlessness as we worked together, his enthusiasm boundless. Uncle Walter made sure he didn't push me too hard, and I loved that hour each day when I had the undivided attention of the two people I loved most in the world.

As my abilities grew, I found that I needed sleep less and less, and the eavesdropping that had been a nasty habit of mine since early childhood was now a daily pastime – only as well as eavesdropping on the conversations around me, now I could travel across the world without leaving my bed; I could listen to a housewife arguing with her husband in Russia, a small girl playing in a stream in China, a couple of men talking about football on a bus in England...there were no limits to my range. I 'visited' people all over the world, and found that when I was outside my body, language was no barrier. I understood the language of people and never had any trouble understanding them – I always navigated more by the more nebulous map of emotions and thought patterns than verbal speech anyway.

Mindful of Uncle Walter's strictures about invading people's memories, I didn't actively browse through people's minds any more – although they frequently broadcast memories to me unwittingly, and I devoured those easily enough. None of what I did was malicious – I was simply eternally voracious for information about all the creatures that shared this world with me. I was as curious about the experiences of the squirrels in the yard as I was about other people. I loved to connect with my fellow dwellers of the world in this way. It fascinated me – no, it did more than that, it fed me. There were times when I was so fat with knowledge, with that feeling of being connected with everything around me, that I glowed white hot with energy – and I loved that feeling more than any other in the world. I could see the threads connecting me to the world, could travel along each and every one of them, and find out where they led me. Sometimes, and more frequently as the years passed, the threads led me to a smouldering black hole that looked as if it had been seared with heat, burnt and truncated at its source, and I always turned away in anger, fear and sadness when I encountered that – for it was another human being lost to the alien force that was consuming this world piece by piece.

I knew by the evidence all around me, even without the prophecies, that our lives were heading towards an irrevocable change – and soon. I was now on the cusp of my tenth birthday, and 2012 loomed ever closer.

John Doggett had remained in his job at the FBI purely in order to provide us with information. He used his job to keep abreast of anything that might concern or affect us, but as the time passed, I knew that Monica feared for him.

"Don't go back," she would beg, when he had managed to drive or fly to where we were currently hiding out, and spend a few brief hours or days with us.

"I have to, Monica," he would tell her, that husky voice of his beseeching her to understand. "We need all the information we can get and we need my badge - it's our protection."

I didn't really understand how the FBI worked – I knew that there were already a large number of aliens and super soldiers working there, but I had no way of knowing how many. I did know that to some extent they had been hampered in their efforts to get too solid a stronghold by John's actions and those of his boss, Alvin Kersh. Kersh was a strange man – it had taken him a long time to grasp the full force of the alien conspiracy but once he did, his allegiance was unswerving. He played his cards very close to his chest though, and I knew there were times when straightforward, bluff, honest John, was utterly exasperated with him. Between them they kept the FBI from falling totally into alien hands – but it was hard work.

"I'm scared that one day you'll come back to me and you won't be you," she told him. He held her, and I knew that he didn't have any reassurances to give her. He was in an exposed position and he knew it. Every day he spent in his job placed him in grave danger but he got word to us of at least two attempts on my life and that was why he stayed. I'll always be grateful to him.

Late one night, a few weeks after they had that conversation, I woke with a feeling of foreboding in my stomach; something was badly wrong. I stretched out my senses but the house was quiet; there were no aliens or super soldiers nearby. I could hear Uncle Walter snoring and Mulder muttering in his sleep as he frequently did, and Monica was fast asleep, wrapped up in John's USMC tee shirt, which she always wore to bed. She insisted he regularly give her one of his worn tee shirts and wouldn't wash it before wearing it – John laughed at her but she said the smell comforted her and I understood that. Smell can be so evocative, and I've found it prompts memories more than any of the other senses. There were no intruders in the house, and outside nothing stirred either. Our Network guards were positioned discreetly around the house and some were even on watch in the outskirts of the town, but there was no danger that I could see. John was the only other one of my little circle of protectors who wasn't present so my thoughts turned immediately to him, and I projected myself down the white, glowing threads that connected us, and leapt straight into his body.

It was well past midnight but he was still in his basement office in the Hoover Building. He spent a lot of time there these days – I think he felt safer there than at home, with all the security the building had, which was ironic really considering what was about to happen. I immediately realised, upon finding myself in John's body, that he was asleep at his desk. I projected myself out of the room, and into the hallways, and didn't have far to go before I saw them. There was only one alien, but he was surrounded by a pack of ten super soldiers, all wearing FBI tags - and all headed in the direction of John's office. I knew immediately what they intended to do to him, and fled back to John's body. He was still fast asleep, and the only thing I could think of doing to wake him was to 'shout' very loudly. I remembered the way I had yelled for Uncle Walter's help when my adopted parents had been killed back on the ranch, and I tried, purposefully this time, to do the same thing. My first effort

produced only the faintest whisper and I despaired of waking him in time. I remembered the last time I had tried to get John's attention from afar, when Walter and I had been arrested; John has a very firm grip on reality and isn't attuned to his surroundings in the same way that Monica and Walter are. He was therefore very hard to get through to. Increasingly desperate, I poured all my energy into one massive shout:

"JOHN!" It's the loudest shout in history, having to carry as it did from our location somewhere in the mid-west all the way to Washington DC - but it worked! Unfortunately it had a side effect that I hadn't anticipated and John wasn't the only one who heard that bellow – thousands of people all over America woke up with a thundering headache and the name 'John' reverberating around inside their skulls. Only the most sensitive were affected, but still, a lot of people heard, including the person it was intended for. John woke with a start, and, having captured his attention, I proceeded to talk to him.

"John, get out of there, NOW!" I ordered in the most imperative tone my ten-year-old mind could muster. He looked around, startled.

"William?" He said blearily.

"They're in the elevator on the 4th floor. They're coming for you. Get out!" I could feel the elevator going lower, and knew it wouldn't be long before it hit the basement – they were seconds away from him. John, to his credit, didn't hesitate. He just got up and ran straight out of the door. I was amazed how easy it had been to talk to him once I had gotten his attention – it really was as simple as having a conversation with somebody on the telephone and if I hadn't been so worried about him I'd have been utterly exhilarated. I stayed in his body, feeling dizzy as he ran up two flights of stairs. John Doggett is a fit man, and he moved at several times the speed my own short legs would have been capable of. I felt jostled, out of control, a spectator inside someone else's body. I couldn't close my eyes to shut out the sight of the world whizzing by too fast, so I just had to go along for the ride. Unbeknownst to me, my initial loud roar had woken up everyone in the house – they were all so closely connected to me that they had heard it as loudly as John had. They were all clustered around my bed, watching my inert body, waiting for me to come back to it and tell them what the hell was going on. Monica in particular was frantic – the name I had shouted had been 'John' after all. She sat holding my hand, while Walter stood beside her, one hand rested comfortably on her shoulder. Mulder stood by the window, half in shadow, his arms crossed over his bare chest, a frown creasing his forehead as he willed me to succeed in whatever I was doing.

John ran along a hallway, and down towards the main entrance.

"NO!" I cried, sensing another posse of aliens just around the corner. "Back." He turned almost seamlessly, ran up another flight of stairs, and along a long corridor. It was dark, and like all big, institutional buildings that are bustling and full during the day, at night it seemed sinister, every footstep echoing resoundingly as John ran.

"Anyone ahead?" John asked me, silently, and I projected ahead and found the way clear.

"No – but is there a way out there?" I asked.

"There's an elevator leading to the parking garage."

"Then hurry," I replied. "The parking garage is where they're headed next."

He sped up, hit the button for the elevator, and leapt inside the moment it opened. We watched the buttons light up as we went down each floor. As we left 'G', headed towards 'PG', John asked me to look ahead again.

"If they're there, then I'll just hit the elevator to go straight back up," he said.

"They aren't there yet – but you've only got about 20 seconds on them. They're coming down the stairs," I told him.

"Okay." He stood, ready, and as the doors opened we were out of that elevator in a shot. He ran for his car, got in, and screeched out of the garage so fast that he laid patches of rubber on the asphalt. "What about the exit?" He said.

"One of the super soldiers is there," I warned him. "The others are coming up behind." At that moment, the posse of super soldiers appeared behind us. They were running so fast that even in the car I didn't think we'd outdistance them but John had other ideas. He revved down hard on the gas, and the car sped forward towards the exit.

"One ahead, just coming up on the left," I told him.

"Okay – look, I've got magnetite bullets in my gun. I'm going to take aim and fire. While I'm doing that, I need you to steer the car and get us through this crash barrier – I don't have time to stop. D'you think you can do that?" He asked. "I've only got one set of eyes and arms so we'll have to share 'em, but I figure that if you take the right arm I'll use the left to shoot."

"I'll try," I replied, wondering if this was even possible. I slid my senses down and took control of his right arm, and he gave a gasp as it suddenly went numb and started doing things that he wasn't making it do. He stamped down on the gas, and I steered the car as best I could. The super soldier suddenly appeared alongside us, and John fired his gun at him as I steered the car through the crash barrier. I couldn't say whether I was more terrified or exhilarated by our high-speed chase out of the FBI building. I guess there isn't a 10 year old boy alive who doesn't want to drive a car, and it was amazing being able to do it in such thrilling circumstances, but at the same time I was scared out of my wits. There was a horrific noise and I wasn't sure what was happening for several seconds, and then I realised we were out of the parking garage, still moving – and headed straight for a shop window.

"William!" John yelled and I steered the car frantically away, scraping and taking the side mirrors off several parked cars. "Okay...give control of the car back to me," John ordered and obeyed with a sigh of relief. "Where are they now?" He asked.

"Still behind us...but they're not fast enough to catch the car," I told him. Even so, neither of us relaxed until a few hours later when he exchanged the deeply battered vehicle we'd driven out of the parking garage for one of the cars that we kept in various hide-outs all over the country for this kind of eventuality. It was only then, when he was sure that we had shaken off our pursuers, that he reached for his cellphone and called Monica. She answered immediately; it felt strange hearing her voice through his ears.

"John? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he reassured her. "A few cuts and bruises but nothing serious."

"Where are you? What happened?"

He told her and I heard her repeat what he'd said to Walter and Mulder.

"What about William? Is he okay? Is he there?" I heard Walter ask in the background.

John chuckled. "He's fine. He's still with me so you're kind of talking to us both right now."

"Well tell him to get the hell home," Mulder called. "Remind him that I'm his father and I disapprove of him sneaking out in the night to have adventures halfway across the country. I'd ground him if I could figure out how the hell to do it!"

We all laughed at that, but I was aware of feeling extremely tired after all the exertion of the night so I said goodbye to John, and travelled along the white threads back to my body. I came to, to find Monica still talking to John on the cell phone – just a couple of seconds had passed since I had been in the car with him, listening to her, and now I was in the same room with her. I sat up, disoriented, blinking blearily.

"Is John really okay?" Monica asked me, after saying goodbye to him.

"He's fine," I reassured her. "He's driving here. You'll see him soon." I repeated the story about what had happened all over again, and Mulder and Walter exchanged worried glances over my head.

"He's finished at the Bureau now. It's too dangerous," Mulder stated flatly. Walter's jaw did a savage sideways snap.

"Damn. I hate to think of that place belonging to them." I sensed Walter's sadness – he believed in the FBI, in what it stood for, in justice and the law, in a way that I don't think any of the others really appreciated or understood and it cut him up to think that we'd finally abandoned the Bureau to our enemies.

"I'm glad he's going to be with us. I hated it each time he went back," Monica said.

I didn't say anything but I was glad that John would be coming back too. For purely selfish reasons it meant that Luke would visit more often for a start – and as Luke, Samantha and Emily were my main playmates, and Luke and I were now the same age, I anticipated having some fun with him. I did also want to have John where I could see him. I didn't want to lose any of the people I had come to love and view as my family, and in some peculiar way, the older I got, the less I viewed them as my protectors and the more I started viewing myself as their protectors. I was their early warning system, and, as had just happened with John, I was as good at helping them out when they were in trouble as they had always been at protecting me.

John arrived the following day, looking weary, but essentially upbeat, as usual. He made straight for me and gave me a big hug the moment he arrived.

"William, you saved my ass!"

It felt strange looking at him, having known what it was like to be inside his body and having seen the world through his eyes and I took a few moments to adjust. It was one thing having these abilities, but sometimes I needed some time just to take a reality check.

"There's one thing that's been bothering me," John said, as he sat down wearily in a chair. "What the hell happened to Kersh? There was no warning from him that this was about to happen – nothin'. Do you know where he is, William? I need to tell him what happened and I can't reach him on his cell."

I knew Kersh well enough to be able to trace him – we'd met on one occasion - so I sent out my thoughts along the little white glowing lines that connected us, and followed down the one that led to Kersh...only to find a dark, black, smouldering hole at the end where he should have been. It's completely different to what happens when someone dies – then their energy is simply consumed into the whole – so I knew what had happened to him.

"I'm sorry, John. They got to him first," I whispered.

"Christ, he's...?"

"They've already infected him with the virus and killed his body – he's mutating into a super soldier right now," I told him wearily. I hated it so much when this happened. John shook his head, and I could feel everyone's shock.

"Oh damn. I admit that I had some issues with the man, but he came through for us more than once. Goddamn it!" John got up, and kicked his chair angrily.

"Another few minutes and it could have been you, John," Monica said, placing a hand on his arm. "Thank god William was able to warn you."

"Yeah." John looked at me, an expression of profound gratitude in his eyes but I was thankful too – the thought of John's life-force disappearing into one of those smouldering, burnt-out black holes upset me more than I can express, and I couldn't bear to think how devastated Monica would have been if that had happened.

I liked having John around again. He's such a man's man and he filled a very important and necessary slot in my family; he didn't have Mulder's volatile moodiness, sharp dry humour, and incredible intellect that always kept me endlessly fascinated, and neither did he have Monica's intuitive grasp of my abilities and emotions. While he and my Uncle Walter had some superficial likenesses, John didn't have Uncle Walter's innate air of authority, or his underlying complexity. John Doggett was a simple, flesh and blood man – an everyman really, and I found him incredibly easy to be around. John was still a sceptic – if he couldn't see it, or touch it then he had a problem accepting it. The two instances in which he had been personally affected by my abilities were profound experiences for him and I believe it was for this reason that he suggested, soon after returning to us, that we make an attempt to unite the country – and the world if possible – against the aliens in our midst.

Book Four: Mother by Xanthe

It was late October in 2011, and as the year we had all been dreading came closer, there was a rising tide of panic amongst both ourselves and the Network. People like John, and Hank Mabbut, wanted us to do something – anything – to deal with the coming apocalypse. The only problem was knowing **what** to do. Mulder was in favour of finding out as much as possible, Walter was of the opinion that there was only some point in acting when it became clear what we should do, and Monica felt that the way would become clear enough in its own time - but John wanted to make a pre-emptive strike.

"I think we've gotta make this public. We have to get out there, and face these guys down," John argued passionately as we sat around the kitchen table of our abode of the month.

"You make this public, you'll just get the same ridicule I had for years on end at the FBI," Mulder told him. "People won't believe you – people won't want to believe you, John. They're afraid to believe."

"Mulder, the only reason people didn't believe before was because you didn't have proof," John argued. "Well now you do."

"I do?" Mulder raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. Now you have William – he's living proof. We've all experienced the things he can do. We all know he's the key to fighting the aliens. Well let's go public and take the fight to them."

"I want to make one thing clear," Walter said, leaning forward in his seat. "Whatever we decide to do, nobody views William as a weapon, or as a walking fulfilment of some ancient prophecy. He's a boy. He's our child. We don't use him and we don't make him do anything he doesn't want to do."

I smiled at Uncle Walter. He knew that the others had my best interests at heart as well, but sometimes in the heat of the discussions it sounded as if I was some kind of neutron bomb to be deployed at the right moment. I loved that Uncle Walter was so protective of me.

"I agree," Monica said. "We know William is the key to all this but he's still a 10 year old kid who falls off his bike and skins his knees. We have to remember that."

"I ain't forgetting it," John said, his tone of voice showing his alarm that anyone would think differently. "You all know I love this kid like he was my own son."

"So, what are you suggesting, John?" Mulder asked, leaning back in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest.

"I think we should go to the top – go to someone who has the capability to fight these bastards."

"We have tried that before, John," Walter pointed out. Over the past three years we had made various discreet overtures to a variety of different people to try and gain some support in the coming battle. Walter, Mulder and Monica had pulled in every favour they had ever earned in

the Pentagon, DOD and anywhere else they could think of, but they had drawn blanks wherever they went. Those who didn't laugh us off thought we were insane and there was, of course, no evidence to support anything we said.

"I know," John nodded. "But we never went high enough before. This time I think we should do somethin' different. This time I think we should go to the top."

Mulder, Monica and Walter all exchanged looks, and then gazed expectantly at John, waiting for him to finish.

"This time I think we should go to the President," John finished.

There was silence for a moment and then Mulder laughed out loud.

"So, you think we should just walk into the Oval office and say, 'hey, Mr. President, did you know that the world is being taken over by aliens who use a virus to infect human beings and turn them into indestructible slaves called super soldiers?'"

"Why not?" John shrugged. "At least we'll know we've tried. Sure as hell beats sitting around on our asses waiting for the bastards to come after us which is mainly what we've been doin' these past few years."

"We've been protecting William," Walter interjected angrily.

"I know – and that was necessary – still is - but we gotta start thinking about the wider picture," John insisted. "Look, when I first heard about these aliens and all this talk about colonisation, I thought that a date had been set and they were gonna come down here in big ships and there'd be fighting and we'd be at war with them, but that ain't going to happen, is it, Mulder?" He glanced at my father who frowned, and shook his head wearily.

"There are ships up there, John. I've been in one of them," he said.

"I know – but they ain't gonna land them on the White House lawn are they?" John continued, his voice passionate. "This is an invasion by stealth, Mulder. They're gradually taking us over, picking us off one by one and what I'm saying is that if we don't act soon it'll be too late – there'll be more of them than us, and there won't be anybody left to fight them."

"He's got a good point," Monica said quietly. "Reports coming in from the Network suggest that the number of super soldiers and alien walk-in's has risen exponentially in the past year. How long before they outnumber us altogether?"

"Okay – but how the hell are we going to get to see the President and what are we going to say that will convince him he has to do something?" Walter asked.

"Marita Covarrubias," Mulder said quietly. "She still works for the UN – in fact she's recently been promoted to a pretty important position. She could get us in to see him."

"Marita?" Walter frowned. "No offence, Mulder, but I've never been sure that woman can be trusted – she did work for the Syndicate after all."

"I know – but that was a long time ago and after what they did to her...well, her allegiances are different these days."

"You've seen her recently?" Walter pressed. Mulder's wanderlust had not abated in the past couple of years; although he spent most of his time with us, he occasionally felt the need to go off and find out what was going on in the rest of the world. We lived such a secluded life that we needed his reports, and John's, and the Networks, in order to find out what was happening out there.

Mulder nodded. "It always takes a lot of persuading to get her to help – she's wary about her own safety, but if we can make a good case for this then she might just do it."

I barely listened to the rest of what they were saying. My mind was already racing ahead to the thought of meeting the President. I was just a small kid from a ranch in Wyoming, and however strange my life had been, I still could hardly believe that what we were going to do was so important that I would end up visiting the White House and actually talking to the President of the United States. I felt nervous – John had said that was the proof, but how would I convince this most important man of the truth of what we were saying? So much responsibility seemed to rest on my shoulders.

It was agreed that Mulder and John would contact this Marita lady, and see what she could do for us. The weeks dragged by slowly while we waited to see what would happen. Mulder and John were frequently absent, and the tension level grew. When they returned, both men were wound up as tight as springs, and that tension affected all of us. Walter and Mulder had a few of their spectacular fights; throughout the couple of years since Mulder's return to us, their friendship had remained steadfast but their relationship never developed beyond what I had already witnessed. Mulder still struggled to come to terms with my mother's death, and continued the pattern of keeping Walter at arm's length, only occasionally letting him – or any of us really - in. He let Walter and I get closer than anybody else, but there was always a barrier with Mulder. The sad thing was that it was already too late, only Mulder didn't know it – for I did not doubt for one second that he loved us both with every single atom of his damaged heart. I wondered when he would realise that too, stop protecting himself against something that had already happened a long time ago, and start enjoying the happiness that was on offer if he would only take it.

The Network were as anxious as we were in the months leading up to 2012. I think we all thought that the world would explode on the chime of midnight, but the truth was much more mundane. I spent New Year's Eve 2011 sitting with Monica, Walter, Hank and a few of the other close and trusted Network members. Mulder and John were off negotiating their way into a meeting with the President, and I hated it when they weren't around. I was only truly happy when we were all together, as a family. Some of the Network members brought champagne to toast in the new year, but we had little to celebrate. As the town bells rang in 2012, the year of our destiny, we all stood around, looking at each other, each of us wondering what this year would bring.

I noticed Monica slipping outside, and followed her into the back yard a few minutes later. She was standing up to her knees in the snow that had fallen all the previous week, and she was gazing up at the crisp, clear, night sky.

"Monica?" I slipped my hand into her pocket, and found her hand, warm as toast.

"It's so beautiful, William," she whispered. "Suppose we don't get this right? Suppose we lose all this?" She turned to look at me and I thought that she had never appeared more beautiful. Her brown eyes were so vivid, so full of emotion, and the warm orange hue around her glowed with even more intensity than usual. "They're up there and they're down here...and who are we to stop them? How is it even possible? I mean they have these big ships, and what do we have? Guns that don't even slow them down and a world full of people who don't even know what's happening."

I chewed on my lip for a moment, thinking about it. "Monica, our ancestors fought them and won," I said at last.

"They had ships. They could fight them on their own terms," she replied.

"We don't really know how they fought them," I said slowly. "Maybe all their technology wasn't what mattered. Maybe it was the simple power of their connection with the earth that saved them. Mulder said they were a race of prophets – they had skills that we've pretty much lost. Maybe I'm like they were, Monica. Maybe I have the same powers they did."

"But you're just one boy," she said, shaking her head. "There were more of them."

"One boy connected to everyone and everything on this world." I reached out and gently touched her pale cheek, loving the way the light from my fingertips merged with the colours of her aura. She gazed at me, wanting desperately to believe. "I can't promise anything," I told her. "But I believe we can win. I honestly do believe that."

She smiled, taking some comfort from my total belief. I had to be positive – although I had my moments of nervous tension, I was largely insulated by my inherent serenity. I'm glad that whoever put me on this planet, with all these gifts, also gave me this serenity. Without it, I'm not sure I could have coped with all the hopes and expectations that were focussed on me. I was jolted out of our conversation by a sudden sensation that we were being watched. I paused for a moment, concentrating – I didn't feel that sense of danger that I'd felt before, but I knew immediately by the way the fabric of the world around me was rippling with darkness that a super soldier was nearby.

"Monica, go into the house," I whispered. "Go and get the others. Tell them to bring their guns."

"William, what is it?" She asked, alarmed.

"Just do it," I said softly. She disappeared into the house, and a second later, something dropped over the wall and onto the snow beneath. I stood, stock still, and watched the super soldier as he stood up. I recognised him immediately – it was the man who had chased after our car when we were escaping from the cabin, the man Mulder had shot, the man who had called me saashyant – Billy Miles.

"What are you doing here, Billy?" I asked him, feeling strangely calm.

"Please... I want to serve you." He took a step forward, and then threw himself into the snow at my feet in a gesture of abject worship.

At that moment, Uncle Walter, Hank and the other Network volunteers came flying out into the yard, guns raised and ready.

"How the hell did he get in here?" Hank demanded, raising his gun and taking aim. I knew his weapon contained our refined magnetite bullets – they caused more damage than the first bullets Mulder had created and if they were shot straight into the head at point blank range, over and over again, they could even kill. "Shit, security must have gotten lax because it's New Year's Eve. Walter, you'd better take William and move on to the next safe house." We always had a car ready to go, and we always had a choice of three safe houses to go to next. We never decided which one to use until we were actually making the journey – so our enemies would never be able to find out in advance where we were going. "Go, William," Hank urged, seeing I hadn't moved. "I'll slow this one down while you run."

"No." I held up my hand and looked down on the man kneeling in front of me.

"Saoshyant?" Billy whispered, looking up at me. I reached out and touched him, and I could feel the tension in the air skyrocket around us. He was a fast, strong killing machine. All he had to do was reach out and snap my neck...but he didn't. He just continued looking up at me, with an expression of abject devotion in his eyes. Usually when I touch people, I immediately see a flash of who they are, and what their most important and powerful memories are but Billy wasn't human and at first all I saw was blackness. He wasn't connected to this world, and didn't belong here. He wore the shape and form of a human being who had once walked on this earth, but although some of his body was human, most of him was completely alien, from his metal spine to the strange, almost empty formlessness of his brain. However, the one thing I did notice straight away, was that he wasn't under any alien control. Yes he was a super soldier, but at the moment he was renegade – and he had come to me, thinking of me as some kind of saviour. "Please saoshyant. Allow me to serve you. I'll protect you. Please set us free, saoshyant," he whispered. "Please don't let them rule us for all eternity. Please...you don't know what it's like, being forced to obey their commands, bent to their will, suffering their cruelty with no hope of death. Please, if you won't allow me to live, then find a way to help me die. I beg you, saoshyant. I beg you."

I saw into what passed for his soul then. There was something there – a memory of what he had once been but was now no more. He wasn't, in any real sense, Billy Miles, but he did have some of Billy's memories. He inhabited Billy's body, like a ghost haunting an old house, a pale reflection of what he had once been in life. I sensed the last remnants of Billy's soul, trapped in this body, horrified by what he had become.

"It's okay, Billy," I whispered. "It's okay."

"William?" Walter put his hand on my shoulder. "What's happening?"

"Don't you see?" I glanced up at my Uncle. "I'm here for them too, Uncle Walter. They want their freedom and they think that I can give it to them – even if that freedom is death...anything but eternal slavery. They just want to be set free..."

"But what the hell are they? And seriously, William, even if you could defeat the aliens,

could we live side by side with these super soldiers? They're stronger than we are, and more ruthless..."

"No...not more ruthless," I frowned. "The aggression comes from the aliens – they force them to be ruthless, but they aren't inherently aggressive. I agree that we can't live with them – they disrupt the energy of this world, they aren't connected with it. It would cause problems...but they could be our allies against the aliens – and I think we need all the allies we can get."

"How can we tell whether a super soldier is on our side or theirs?" Hank asked, his gun still raised.

"I can tell," I told him firmly. "I knew Billy wasn't any threat to me."

"And if he fell back under alien control?" Monica asked.

"I'd know," I told them.

"He's still dangerous to have around!" Hank protested. "He's like a dog that's turned savage once – however nice and friendly he is, you never know when he's going to turn on you again."

"Guard him all you like, but treat him well. He's staying," I said.

Walter glanced at me, surprised. This was the first time I had issued any orders – I was still only 10 years old, but I had always had a knowledge and a way of speaking that was far beyond my years. Now, for the first time, I also had a sense of my own destiny – and how to take control of it.

"I just know that this is the right thing to do," I told them. Walter nodded.

"Hank – take Billy inside, and keep an eye on him. If William says he stays, then he stays."

It was strange having Billy around. He could talk, but it wasn't easy to hold a conversation with him. He didn't really connect with you so it was like talking to someone that you couldn't quite see and who you knew didn't really understand you on a fundamental level. He had some memories of his own, as well as those of a former life, but his memories of his time under alien control were shadowy, and shapeless. He didn't like the way that made him feel, and he didn't like the flashbacks he had to killing – he was human enough still to be profoundly uncomfortable with those memories. He did have some understanding of his own existence though – all he saw stretching ahead of him was a life of servitude to cruel and demanding taskmasters, without any prospect even of death, so indestructible was his new form. I could never claim that I formed any real bond with Billy, but I was fond of him in a way. It wasn't his fault that he had become like this, and he and his kind deserved a saviour as much as we did – maybe more for they had lost more. Even if all I could eventually give them was their release from their slavery through death, I knew that would be enough for them.

It seemed to me that time speeded up over the next few weeks. That might have been a feature of my ever growing powers, or maybe Billy's presence changed my perception in some way, or, more likely, the grip of destiny took a firmer hold on me as we approached the final few months of the old world. Somehow, I think we all knew that a new world was dawning – and whether it was one we would like or not, or whether it was one we would even live to see, was all down to how the hand of fate played out in the coming weeks.

Mulder and John had set up our meeting with the President. Mulder had been particularly concerned about security – up until now I had been in hiding, but for the first time I would be going out in the open, into a public place, where it would be impossible to protect me from super soldiers. He and John worked long and hard on keeping the meeting with the President as secret as possible and ensuring my security as much as possible. The meeting with the President hadn't been as hard to set up as my father had feared – enough aliens and super soldiers had now taken on human form that there was a general sense of unease in the world, and stories had started to filter into the papers of how people were committing acts that were totally out of character, and how others who had died, seemed, miraculously, to have returned to life, although they were strangely altered. There had been an upsurge in violence as the super soldiers went through the world like a plague of locusts, their ranks multiplying every day. In this mood, Washington had taken Mulder and John's overtures more seriously than might previously have been expected. Although the President and his advisers had agreed to the meeting readily enough, the negotiations for when and where it would take place had been time consuming. Mulder had been concerned for my safety. His main preoccupation was that having shown the President my skills, I'd be whisked off to some top security government institution to be prodded and experimented upon so that they could find the source of my abilities. I knew from the memories he shared with me that this was a very real worry – he had known enough people with paranormal powers in his life to have an understanding of what happened to them if they showed themselves to the authorities.

"I wish there was some way you could scan the President before we go," Mulder fretted. "I don't like the idea of us going in there blind."

"I can't pinpoint someone that accurately," I sighed. I could send out his thoughts and connect with people randomly all over the world, following the threads that linked every single being, but unless I had met the person I was trying to scan, or was touching them, I couldn't tune into anyone specific. So, although none of us was happy to walk into the White House without more information, we all accepted that everything we would do from now on would contain an element of risk.

I left the safety of our last house one cold Winter morning, bundled under a blanket in the back of a car. I knew, in my heart, that this was the last time I would see that house – I didn't know what was about to happen, but I did know that the time of waiting was coming to an end; I could feel it in my soul. I went with my usual entourage, my family, of Mulder, Walter, John and Monica. We left Hank and Billy and the rest of the Network behind. We were on our own now, and would take the consequences of our actions.

I found myself becoming increasingly nervous as we approached Washington in our car. I rehearsed in my head all the ways in which I would try to convince the President that we were telling the truth about what was happening in the world. Maybe, this was why I had been born with these strange powers, I thought to myself. Maybe this was the reason – maybe everything in my life had been leading to this one day, when my abilities would convince the

President that he had to take action against the aliens. I envisaged the full might of the US armed forces being unleashed against our common foe, saw Mulder working side by side with government scientists to create magnetite weapons that would enable us to stand a chance in open warfare... and of course, as it turned out, I was as wrong as I could have been.

I was so nervous by the time we reached The White House that it was all I could do to stop trembling. Suddenly I wasn't the saoshyant, or Adam Kasia, or any kind of saviour. I was just William Scully Mulder, a 10 year old boy, walking into the greatest office of state in the world and I was petrified. However much Walter had tried to protect me, I knew that this entire meeting hinged on me. Supposing I was unable to perform on cue? Supposing my abilities deserted me just when I needed them most? Supposing the whole world ended up totally destroyed because of me?

I got out of the car, and my knees almost gave way beneath me. Walter put an arm around my shoulders and that grounded me. I felt myself drawing strength from his energy and his constant presence was a great support. Monica gave me one of her megawatt warm smiles and adjusted my tie. I stood still for her while she slicked down my hair, and I had the strangest sensation; she was behaving like a mother, and, in truth, she was my mother in every important respect. She was one of the three mothers I'd had, and, by virtue of when she came into my life, she was inevitably the one I had ended up knowing the best. I loved her like a mother, but even so, standing on the threshold of this great event, I had a pang of sorrow and regret for my first mother, the one I had barely known at all, and who I missed so badly. My obsession with Dana Scully hadn't lessened in the intervening years – if anything, it had only grown stronger with time. Dana was the one thing that made me human - and she was also my greatest weakness. My abilities marked me out as strange and unusual, and I knew that in all respects except one I was completely unlike any other 10 year old boy on this planet. Dana Scully was that one exception – my feelings for my birth mother connected me to my own humanity because I missed her, and loved her, and still cried at night sometimes for the fact that I had never really known her. I wanted her to be proud of me, and I still fantasised that she wasn't really dead, and that one day she would hold me in her arms and tell me that she loved me.

Standing there that day, at The White House, I wanted, more than anything else, to have her by my side as I walked in to the Oval Office to face the most important moment of my life.

The White House was beautiful – I had been brought up in a series of makeshift homes and the ranch where I had spent my early years had been plainly furnished by my impoverished adoptive parents. This place was magnificent; I couldn't believe how plush the carpets were underfoot, and how many works of art hung on the walls. It was also full of people, and that scared me. There were so many interconnected threads of light that they all merged into a coalescent whole, so vivid as to be almost blinding. I had to tone down my senses just in order to walk down the hallway, and I was very grateful that Uncle Walter and Mulder were standing on either side of me, holding me up.

We were sent to wait in a beautiful room, painted a deep blue colour, with a massive, highly polished mahogany table as its centrepiece. I stood with my hands behind my back, hardly daring to touch anything. This place hummed with an aura of power and history that was daunting; even someone without my abilities would have felt it. As it was, I was completely overwhelmed. My strange new surroundings closed in on me, overloading my senses; first all the people, then all the history, and the very fact of being in such a huge town, with so many

different auras, voices and memories clamouring for my attention. I had never been anywhere like this and I was struggling to cope.

"William – are you okay?" Monica asked, attuned, as ever, to my emotional state.

"No...I can't...it's all too much," I said, reaching up to undo my collar. "I can hardly breathe. I can't...see..."

"Here." Walter helped me to a plush blue couch and sat me down, while Monica poured me a glass of water from a decanter on the table and brought it over. I sipped it gratefully, but it didn't help. My problems weren't physical – they were related to my strange abilities that were struggling to cope under a huge influx of stimuli. I had, after all, led a relatively quiet life. I had watched TV, used the internet, read newspapers and magazines – I knew all about the world we lived in but I had barely ever stepped foot in it, and being in these illustrious surroundings was like being thrown into a busy, brightly lit circus after years of living in a wilderness.

"I think I'm shutting down. There's too much..." I whispered. "It's like looking at a hundred television screens all at the same time. I can't concentrate on any of them."

"William." Mulder crouched down in front of me and touched my knee. "It's okay. We're here. Just focus on my thoughts – on me - tune everything else out."

I did as he said, and relaxed into his shining mind, and the thought patterns that I knew so well. It was comforting, and familiar, and I immediately started to feel better.

At that moment, a woman walked into the room, accompanied by a handsome, dark haired man.

"Marita." Mulder stood up, but he stayed in physical contact with me, moving his hand onto my shoulder.

"Mulder." She nodded. "John. Miss. Reyes. Mr. Skinner." She gestured with her head to them, her cool, aloof eyes flicking towards me. She was a stunningly beautiful woman but her demeanour was as cold as ice. Inside, though, she was different. I caught a brief flash of a fiery, passionate nature, well hidden from view, and then my senses crashed again as they were overloaded once more.

"Focus on me, William," Mulder reminded me. I nodded, and tried to do as he had said, but even as I did so I wondered who the dark haired man was, why nobody had spoken to him and why he was dressed so differently to the rest of us. I had never seen Walter or Mulder in a suit before, and yet here they were, wearing starched shirts and ties and jackets as if they had been born to them. I recalled that part of their lives I had not shared, the time before I was born, when they had worn these clothes every day. They looked so fine and handsome in them, while I felt clumsy and unsure of myself in my suit. I had never worn one in my life before and it felt stiff, formal and restrictive. All I could think about was how the collar of my shirt dug into my neck and how my arms felt as if they were trussed up inside the jacket. The man standing beside Marita was clad in black jeans, a black shirt and a black leather jacket and looked out of place amongst so much formality. He was staring at me, a concerned expression in his green eyes. He glanced towards the door of the Oval Office and back at me.

"William, you have to concentrate. This is important," he told me.

"I know that!" I snapped at him. Mulder's hand squeezed my shoulder reassuringly.

"William – is someone else here?" Monica asked.

"I..." I gazed around the room confused – couldn't they see the dark haired man?

"Just gather your thoughts, William. You might need to do something very impressive in a moment," the dark haired man said. As if I wasn't aware of that already!

At that moment the door opened, and we were called into the Oval Office. I took a deep breath, got to my feet, and, surrounded by my friends and family, I walked through that door.

I felt it the moment I walked in. I suspect they had done something to the place, erected some kind of field around it to dampen the aura of what was inside, because the black chill almost blasted me off my feet the moment I trod on that famous carpet.

"NO!" I cried, wordlessly, but it was already too late. The President, his chief of staff, and half a dozen other men stood there, looking at me – and none of them was human. A door closed behind us, trapping us in that vile, freezing room, devoid of life, teeming with monstrosities. The President walked towards me and stopped right in front of me.

"Well," he said, with a smile, using the President's voice, walking the President's walk, looking on the outside just like the man we had elected to this high office when on the inside he was pure darkness. "This is fortunate. We've been trying to hunt you down for years and you just up and walk right into our arms."

I knew from the aura of power surrounding him that this was not a super soldier but an alien being – and I knew, also, that he was one of the most important aliens, one of their leaders. He looked human, but as I came face to face with him, I had a sudden image of hissing coils of tentacles, and I knew that the face he wore was a mask for what he really was.

We had no guns, obviously, but even if we had, we wouldn't have stood a chance against the aliens. There were too many of them and they were too powerful. Even so, my friends realised immediately that we had walked into a trap, and formed a protective circle around me. I could feel their fear and tension, combined with the terrible knowledge that the worst thing they could ever have imagined had just happened.

"Did you really think you could stop us?" The President said. "We already own your planet – how many of you do you think are left?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the dark haired man move so that he was standing, protectively, next to Marita. She looked as shocked as we were, and it was clear that she hadn't known this would happen.

"William," the dark haired man said, in a low, intense voice. "Now might be a good time for you to perform that impressive act I was talking about earlier."

I blinked, wondering what the hell he meant, but even as I was wondering I saw the President

reach out a cold, clammy hand towards Walter. He carried death in that hand and I knew that he intended to strike Walter dead with a single blow. I also knew, just as surely, that if Walter died my own life would be at an end as I could not live with the grief. What I did next, I did through pure instinct, but maybe it was an instinct that had been bred into me for just this precise moment. My entire being seemed to coalesce, and I became a beam of the brightest white light, pure energy. Without knowing how or why, I folded this energy outwards, so that it engulfed those standing around me. All this happened in a split second, but when the President's alien hand came into contact with the protective field surrounding Walter, he let out a piercing scream. His hand changed, became a tentacle, and for a moment we saw him in his true form – ugly, reptilian and utterly alien. He writhed for a moment, his tentacle caught in my energy field. His companions rushed to his aid, but they were unable to penetrate the field that surrounded us, and fell screaming to the floor as it burned them.

"Move," I ordered, speaking to my friends non-verbally.

"This way," the dark haired man said, and he ran across the room, and showed us the door.

"Open," I said, and the door, as if by magic, swung open in front of me. This wasn't a talent I'd ever used before although it was latent. I believe it was one of the earliest I discovered, lying in my crib as a baby making my mobile move with the power of my mind alone, but it was a skill that had lain dormant for many long years. My father had once told me how his brother, Jeffrey, had injected me with a drug that he said would make me normal – I wonder now if all it did was suppress the abilities I had already begun to show at that time. It certainly hadn't stopped any of the others from manifesting. Now though, I felt a power I had never known before coursing through me. I was no longer William, a flesh and blood boy, but had become a being of pure energy. Protected by the field I had placed around them, I walked with my friends out of the door and down a hallway. People came running at us, some trying to fire their guns at us but I easily deflected the bullets. As we walked I felt invincible, filled with a confidence I had never possessed before. I felt utterly and completely alive and in control of the situation. My earlier nerves had gone, to be left by a strange sense of calm. However dangerous our current situation, I was certain that I could escort my friends to safety. For their part, they were bewildered and afraid, but the serenity I was projecting seemed to affect them too, and they stayed close to the shining beam of light that I had become, remaining always within my protective field of pure white light.

I did not know my way around the White House, and had no idea how to get out, but that was where my dead friend came to my aid. He led me down numerous hallways and passageways, and I followed him unerringly, trusting him implicitly. My trust wasn't misplaced, as he eventually led us straight back to our car. We got in, and John began to drive, as if in a dream, my shield of glowing white light now extended around the whole car, protecting us. Above us I heard the roar of helicopters. There was more gunfire, but my protective field held strong. It felt smooth, almost seamless, and utterly effortless. I had come into this building as a 10 year old boy who had to have his tie adjusted and his hair slicked down and I exited it as the saashyant, the Adam Kasia, the world's child. Finally, it seemed, I had come into my birthright.

At first we were followed, but I gently dissuaded our pursuers from continuing with their chase. Most of them were humans, acting on the orders of a President that they also assumed to be human. I reached out with my mind, and spoke to them through the connection I had with every living being on the planet.

"You have been deceived," I whispered, softly, caressing them with the tendrils of glowing light that joined us. *"We are not your enemy, we are not the threat."* And, one by one, they stopped chasing us, and came to a stunned halt as they tried to make sense of what was happening.

John drove for a couple of hundred miles, and then I had to withdraw, back into myself, taking up my human form again. I came back to myself with a start, and could have wept for the loss of my glowing, energised form.

"William – are you okay?" Walter asked as I slumped back into the car, a small boy once more, dressed up in his Sunday best in a suit and tie.

"I'm just tired, Uncle Walter," I told him in a small voice. I realised that the car was very cramped with the addition of Marita in the back seat. Sitting opposite her, half crouched between the driver's seat and the back passenger seat at an angle that would have been impossible if he had been alive, was the dark haired man. I had been so confused, my senses so befuddled, that I had not realised that he was dead and nobody else could see him.

"Well, you said it had to be something impressive," I told him.

He grinned. "It was."

"Thank you," I told him. "For showing me the way out."

"Oh, you'd have found it on your own I think, but..." He shrugged. "I had to be there for her. I wasn't very nice to her when I was alive, although that doesn't mean I didn't love her."

"I understand." I nodded. "Should I tell her that?"

"No. She doesn't want to hear it." He smiled at me. "Just...tell her to think of me sometimes. She was the only good thing I ever had in my life and I threw it away. Despite all I did, I was capable of love – I know that now." He leaned over, and planted a gentle kiss on her cheek, and then he was gone.

"William?" Mulder said. "There's someone else here, isn't there? Are you okay? Do you need any help?"

"No. I'm okay," I said, turning to my father with an exhausted sigh. "He's gone now anyway."

"Who was he?" Walter asked. I hesitated, unsure whether to tell him. Both he and my father had a dark and violent history with the man who had just helped us. His name flashed into my head and I smiled: Alex. Alex Krycek.

"It's not important," I said.

"I hate to say this – but what the hell do we do now?" John asked, turning around in his seat and looking at me. Mulder touched my shoulder.

"William? Did you have any other big surprises planned?" He asked.

I thought about it for a moment. "This is it now," I told them. "It's started. We can't hide any more. The time has come to fight."

"Did you have a particular battlefield in mind?" Walter asked, two emotions battling inside him. On the one hand, he saw me as William, the child he had looked after for the past five years, but somehow, in the past couple of hours, I had become something else, and he didn't know where he stood with me any more. I knew though – he was still my Uncle Walter, still my security blanket, still the father of my heart.

"We need somewhere with a lot of magnetite," I said, that knowledge suddenly springing into my mind.

"The biggest magnetite quarry is in the Nevada desert," Mulder said.

"Where?" John reached for the map under his seat.

"I'm sure it won't come as a surprise to anyone in this car when I tell you that it's not marked on the map – it's in Area 51," Mulder informed us. "It isn't a coincidence that that ship crashed in Roswell all those years ago. It was the magnetite in that quarry that brought them down. They got too close."

"It's the right place," I nodded, sensing a huge open space, completely un-built up after having been requisitioned by the military. "It's perfect. We need to go there."

"They won't let us in," John warned.

"Of course they will." I smiled at him. "We also need people," I added thoughtfully. "Lots of people."

"I'll call Hank," Monica said, reaching for her cell phone. "I'll tell him it's time to get the entire Network to Area 51."

"We need more than that," I whispered, my mind reaching out to touch all the tendrils that were the other minds in the world as they brushed against mine.

"We'll call all the TV and radio stations," John said, reaching for his own cell phone, but I stopped him.

"No...that's not necessary," I told him softly. "I know a way to contact them."

>I gathered the last energy I had, and transformed myself once more into that glowing white ball of light. Although it was exhausting, I loved this feeling of connection and power, but I didn't have time to just enjoy it – I had to call every single human being left on the planet to me. In my new, energised form, I could sense billions of minds, pressing in on mine and once I opened up there were so many people's thoughts that for a moment I was overwhelmed and couldn't say a thing, but then I rallied, and remembered my task.

"Come and join us," I invited. "We are all under threat...come and fight with us...let us fight and live or fight and die together. Either way, let us be one...come and join us..." Just a few short months ago I had reached thousands of people when trying to rouse John from his

slumber but now I needed to reach billions. I sent out wave after wave of encouragement, having no idea whether anybody would respond or not.

"Follow us. Come with us. Take up your humanity and fight against those who would despoil and destroy our world." I showed them the ugliness of the aliens, how their true form was at variance with every harmonic sound and dance on this planet.

All around me there were questions, worries, concerns...and I had to silence them all with one single blast to stop them overwhelming me. I couldn't answer their questions, I could only tell them what I knew to be true:

"Come or we are destroyed." It was the mental equivalent of shouting at the top of your lungs, and when I'd finished, I slumped back into my body, completely exhausted.

"Did it work?" Mulder asked anxiously. "Are they coming?"

"I don't know," I whispered, too tired to even think. I slumped against Walter and he put his arm around me.

"It's okay, William, get some sleep. John – drive us to the nearest Network safe house. William needs food and rest."

John nodded and that was the last thing I remember until the next day when I woke up in a strange bed in a strange house with no recollection of how I'd got there. Walter was sitting beside me, Mulder was standing by the window looking out, and Monica was sitting on John's lap in an armchair next to Mulder. I came to, feeling groggy.

"How are you feeling?" Walter asked as I blinked into wakefulness.

"Okay...did it work?" I asked them. They all looked so tired and anxious.

"Come over here and see for yourself," Mulder told me, and I slid out of the bed and padded over to the window in my bare feet. Mulder twitched the drapes aside, and I stared in amazement at the sight that greeted me.

There was a line of cars and people stretching back as far as I could see, all converging on this house. Strangely, for so many people, there was very little noise. They seemed to be possessed of a quiet kind of knowledge, a sense of destiny that stilled all questions and thought. Instead they were focussed on just one thing – finding me and following me wherever I took them. Just a short time ago, I might have felt bowed down by that amount of responsibility, but somehow the phenomenal burgeoning of my abilities created in me a sense of confidence and calm that insulated me from the sheer enormity of what was taking place. I felt like a candle that had been steadily burning for years, but now suddenly, overnight, had turned into a massive, flaming fire. The nearness of the people energised me, and already I could feel my head starting to clear, and my powers responding to the challenge facing us.

"I can't believe this is really happening," Monica whispered. "After all these years of waiting – it seems so sudden. What happens now, William?"

"We go, very slowly, to Area 51," I murmured. "We need the people – I can't do this without

them. We need as many as possible – that's why we have to go slowly, to give as many as possible a chance to join us."

"And what happens when we get there?" Mulder asked, gazing at me searchingly. I could see from the expression in his eyes that he could hardly believe that I was his son, the child he'd spent the past few years protecting – I had suddenly become something else. I'm often asked to describe that time, when I was at the apex of my powers, but it's hard to explain what it felt like. I felt as if a light had been switched on, and I was able to access the memories of my entire race, not just the people around me. I felt connected to the past, to the people who had built those spaceships that foretold of my coming, connected to the present, to every living creature around me, connected to the future, and all our hopes and dreams for our world. I was bursting with so much power that it was all I could do to maintain my human form. I wanted to become that creature of pure light – the one I had glimpsed a few years previously in the library at Mulder's house, when I had take Monica and Walter's hands and merged with them. I knew that now was not the time though – although I was vastly more powerful than I had ever been, I had to pace myself for the moment when my powers would truly find their fullest expression. I had to wait until we were in Area 51.

There was a great deal to accomplish before we could lead our army to Nevada. It was evident just by looking outside that millions of people were on their way to join us, and we had to find ways to feed and take care of them during the long slow march to our destiny. This was when the Network came into its own. There were Network towns at regular intervals on our route to Nevada – they were already busy setting up the supply lines that would make sure there was enough food, water, blankets and other necessities to keep people alive. Yet, even so, I had no idea how I was going to marshal all these people into some semblance of order, to keep them happy and safe during that journey. That task, thankfully, was taken away from me the following day, when Hank brought a young man to see us.

I knew him immediately – he was the 'sensitive' that Hank had told us about a few years previously, my precursor, and possessed of many of the same skills that I had. He was short, his body slightly twisted, and he had a limp. I knew, the moment I saw him, that something terrible had been done to him. His memories told of his mind being ripped into, torn apart, and something stolen from him, and yet he remained gifted, and as committed to saving this planet as I was.

Mulder laughed out loud when he saw him, and drew him into a big bear hug.

"Gibson! I've been looking for you for years!" He exclaimed. "Where the hell have you been hiding?"

"I could say the same about you, Mulder," Gibson Praise replied with a shy smile. "I was given shelter by the Networks and I asked them not to tell anyone I was with them. I needed to keep hidden so that our enemies wouldn't find me."

"He was too damn useful to lose," Hank added, patting Gibson heartily on the back. "And he was real insistent that we didn't tell anyone where he was - not even you, Mulder."

"It was just safer that way - for all of us," Gibson shrugged, and then his expression changed. "I heard about Agent Scully. I'm sorry, Mulder."

My father swallowed hard, and his volatile emotions went on a rollercoaster ride for awhile, but then he steadied himself and put on his usual brittle mask to hide his grief. I sensed my father had a long history with this young man standing in front of us, and that he trusted him absolutely. Even if that had not been the case, I would have trusted Gibson anyway – we were two of a kind he and I, and we shared many of the same strange abilities. His weren't as powerful as mine, and had, in some part, been damaged beyond repair by what my father's father had done to him, years ago, but he was a good man, and I liked him immediately. I had wanted to meet him ever since Hank had told us about him, but my requests had always been turned down. Gibson had been afraid that it would be too dangerous for us to be in the same place until it was the right time, in case the aliens found us. Now, it seemed, that right time was finally here.

Gibson came over to me, shyly, and offered me his hand. I felt a surge of electricity as my own energised form came into contact with his powerful aura.

"I've been waiting for you, William," he told me. "I want to help."

"Can you take care of all the people?" I asked him. "I can protect them from attack, but I might not have the energy to see to their needs. Can you do that?"

"Of course." He smiled at me, and I saw inside his mind. He understood how everything was connected, the same way that I did, but his particular talent was people; he could sense their needs, and draw them together. I knew that my army would be in safe in his hands. "The only thing you need to worry about is fighting them," Gibson told me. "We'll take care of everything else." He looked at Hank, Walter, Mulder, John and Monica, and they all nodded.

"We'll get all these people to Nevada, William," Hank agreed. "You just make sure you whip some alien butt when we get there."

People gave small, strained smiles; we all knew that the battle ahead would be hard fought, and nobody was yet entirely sure how it might be won.

The next few days were a blur although I didn't experience them on any real physical level. I was surrounded by a constant halo of light, and if I didn't concentrate on keeping my corporeal form then I found myself dissipating into a white, glowing stream of energy. Walter kept me as grounded as possible, reminding me to eat, even insisting that I slept, although it was impossible to explain to him that I had too much energy to do anything as inactive as sleep.

We journeyed to Nevada at the head of a massive convoy of cars and people. We were even joined by several herds of horses and packs of dogs and cats and various other assorted animals who had clearly heard and been affected by my call. The sky turned dark as flock after flock of birds joined the procession, wheeling overhead and forming what felt like a protective blanket above us. I was grateful to them for their early warning cries, because the aliens clearly weren't about to let our progress go unimpeded. Some time after noon on the second day, several huge spaceships appeared overhead. Effortlessly, I extended myself, so that the entire convoy was bathed in my protective light. The ships fired a torrent of burning

laser beams into our midst but they bounced harmlessly off the shield I had erected around us, and after awhile, they gave up, and the ships moved away. I was relieved because the shield took so much of my energy that I wasn't sure how long I could keep it in place.

Every night we would stop to make camp, and I would send out my mind and survey the army that had sprung up behind me. Only the most attuned and gifted people had responded to my call by joining us, but there were millions of them. The rest of the world waited, offering their mental energy and support, knowing that either it was too far to come or they could not be of much use if they tried. It never ceased to amaze me that so many made the journey though. Each night I would watch thousands more join us. Somehow, they knew to bring things with them. Thus they came with tents, food and tankers of water, and those supplies, combined with the masterly logistical efforts of Gibson and the Network, kept the people happy and fed. There was the most amazing atmosphere in that convoy. Nobody complained, nobody fought, or got drunk, or killed anybody else. It was as if they were all affected by my serenity. They knew that the fate of the entire world depended on them, and, as is so often the case, humanity rose to that challenge. Petty disputes and age-old enmities were forgotten as strangers greeted each other like long-lost cousins, and journeyed together in peaceful harmony. Everyone who was in that convoy still speaks warmly of the atmosphere among all those people. It was like nothing else this planet has experienced, a coming together of people and animals, all on the move towards our destiny. I saw humankind at its very best during that long journey to Nevada.

I felt the magnetite before we even got close to Area 51. It began as a little tingling sensation in my fingertips, and, as we got closer, the tingling became more like a jangling, singing to me, drawing me in, rising to a crescendo with every mile we travelled. I knew the quarry had to be enormous because of the massive pull it was exerting on me. In my current energised state I couldn't have resisted that pull even if I had wanted to. In my corporeal form, magnetite burned me – now that I had transcended my flesh and blood body, I felt myself burning with it. It was like fuel to my fire, and it pushed me into an even more heightened state of existence.

I don't remember much about our arrival at Area 51. I do know that Monica and Walter requisitioned the military base for us to stay in, right next to the quarry, and that was where we sat and waited. The military allowed us entry, as I'd predicted, without so much as a single question. I think they were probably even waiting for us, because a huge crowd of them were gathered to greet us as we entered the area, and they all bent over backwards to help us. It was ironic really; after so many years of keeping the area secret, now they let the whole world in, but they had been as affected by my call to battle as much as everyone else, and, like everyone else - perhaps even more so - they knew what we were facing.

"What are we waiting for?" John asked, as the endless days of pacing began to fray on everyone's nerves except mine.

"For the right time," I told him. "Look." I took his hand, and sank into his mind, showing him what I could see. Out to the South and East, there was a massive line of people stretching as far as it was possible to see. "And look here," I whispered, showing him the scene to the North and West, where several large spaceships hovered overhead, and line after line of super soldiers marched in an endless procession, controlled by squadrons of their alien masters.

"Oh shit. There's a hell of a lot more of them than there are of us, William," John whispered, horrified. He was a soldier – he knew what the odds were in any battle if you were outnumbered as much as we were.

"I don't think this will be a conventional battle, John," I told him reassuringly.

"Why are the aliens coming here? They know the magnetite is dangerous to them."

"They have to come; if they don't they know we will become too strong, and then we will turn on them. There's safety in numbers for them too – there are too many of them for the magnetite to affect them as badly as it would otherwise; its effects will be dispersed and dissipated.

"So how the hell are we going to fight them?" John asked.

I turned to him, frowning. "I have no idea," I told him. "But when the time comes, I'm sure I'll know."

We went out every night and mingled among the crowds who had gathered on the vast desert plains. People were camped out under the stars, singing and talking, waiting for the moment of destiny to arrive. Nobody mobbed me – they all greeted me by name and although many were shy of approaching me I loved talking to them, feeding off their energy, my powers increasing exponentially every day.

I knew my people were worried about what would happen next, and I couldn't tell them what that would be because I honestly didn't know myself. I just felt that when the time came, I would act on instinct again, and everything would fall into place. We issued our army with as many magnetite bullets as we had – although somehow I didn't think this war would be won by such conventional missiles but maybe they would be useful in buying us time if we needed it.

I often escaped the confines of my body and soared high into the sky, where the many flocks of birds greeted me with squawks of welcome. I loved looking down, and seeing my army of people and animals stretched out beneath me as far as the eye could see. They were so real, so vital and alive. They smelled of humanity unlike the dark black mass that was approaching from the North. The alien army marched in soulless precision across the desert towards us, moving in perfect time like an army of soldier ants, clambering over anything that got in their way. Their dark emptiness was in stark contrast to the vibrant, un-coordinated cacophony of smells and sounds that emanated from my own army, and I shuddered as they came ever closer. It was clear to me that there were as many super soldiers as there were aliens, and I wondered how my people would feel, firing upon the faces of those who they had once loved, but who were now dead and empty - and our implacable foe. For some reason I felt compelled to seek out Billy Miles; he was under armed guard as a precaution on Hank's part and he was as distant and disconnected as always - yet underlying that he was nervous too, as we all were.

"Billy... I know that you and many of your kind think I'm your saviour, but all I might be able to offer you is death," I told him. He looked at me from those dark, empty eyes, and I could have wept for him and all his kind.

"Saoshyant, we would welcome release, however it comes," he told me. "We wish only to be saved from our slavery – and you are our saviour, however you choose to deliver us from our suffering." I bowed my head to him. He and all the super soldiers were hideous mutations, a lesion on the surface of this world, and yet, their plight touched me to my core. They were creatures that should never have been brought into existence, and I feared that the best I would be able to offer them was simply to undo the harm that had been done them, and finally let them rest in peace, as they deserved.

There were times during those few days when it felt as if the whole planet was on the move. The vibrations, the fear, and the energy – they stoked me up to fever pitch, making it impossible for me to relax. I was no longer William Scully Mulder – I had transcended my birth body and was someone – something – else entirely. At least, that's the way it felt to me, until the eve of the final battle when something happened that turned me back into nothing more than a scared 10 year old child.

I was lying on my bed – although levitating a couple of inches above it in a cloud of white light would be a more accurate description. It was night but outside the world was filled with the sounds of people arriving, more every hour, pouring across the desert any way they could, joining the hordes already camped. They came from every nation on the planet, and were of all ages and races. If I sent my senses out even further, I could feel the people coming across rivers and oceans and landmasses – it felt as if the population of the entire globe was headed this way.

I became aware of a presence in the room and knew who it was before I saw. There was the faintest scent of apples and jasmine, and I caught a glimpse of a curtain of red hair, and sat up, immediately.

"Mommy?"

She was there. She was standing in the room, surrounded by a crackling field of white light and at first I thought that she was present only in the same way as Luke, or Alex Krycek or any of the other dead people I had seen – but then I realised that wasn't the case. She was still alive! My father had been wrong: she wasn't dead!

"William," she said softly, holding out her arms to me. She had such a proud look on her beautiful face. I ran towards her, longing to feel her arms around me – only to run straight through her.

"I'm not here – I'm just projecting an image of myself," she told me.

"Where are you then?" I asked, confused.

"Outside...here, let me show you..." She sent me the image of a patch of rocky desert, some miles distant. "Come to me," she said. "I'll be waiting." And then she disappeared.

It was easy enough to slip out of the house – nobody questioned where the Adam Kasia, or saoshyant, or world's child went – I was the summoner, the saviour, and I could do what the hell I liked. I felt in no personal danger – my powers had insulated me from my own flesh

and blood mortality and I no longer feared being hurt, abducted or killed. I knew how strong I was and how well I was able to protect myself. So I ran out into the cold desert night air, blind, deaf and oblivious to everything except the thought that I would soon feel my mother's arms around me – the one thing I had wanted from the moment Mulder had shared his memories with me out by the creek next to the cabin.

I ran away from the gathering hordes of people, into the deserted no man's zone that separated the two camps. The aliens and super soldiers were marching slowly towards us, but there was a distance of a couple of miles still separating the two armies. It was out there, next to three large boulders, that I met my mother.

She was standing, dwarfed by the largest of the boulders, her red hair illuminated by the bright full moon above us. It rustled in the cool desert wind, and blew back, exposing her beautiful pale face, and delicate neck. She was wearing a plain black pantsuit, and looked very much how she had appeared in my father's memories. My own memories began to stir: I was very small, listening to my mother croaking out a rendition of *Jeremiah was a Bullfrog*. She sang tunelessly but with so much verve that she won a smile from my 6 month old lips. I smiled at the memory, and walked towards her. Her aura was strangely impenetrable; it glowed gold and white but I couldn't touch it with my own and I guessed she was shielding herself from the army that was marching towards us.

I stopped, a few feet away from her, and we just stared at each other for a long time. Her eyes were bright and sparkling.

"William," she said, and I had to blink away my tears away that I could see her. I had waited all my life to hear her say my name and now here she was, talking to me.

"Mom," I whispered.

"Oh, William. You're so grown up!" She put her hand to her throat, shaking her head. She was as beautiful as Mulder's memories had suggested – her blue eyes the colour of sapphires, her body petite and yet possessed of such an innate strength. "Come here, William," she said, holding her arms open for me. I longed to run straight into them, but something stopped me. I hesitated.

"Where have you been, Mom?" I asked her. "I waited for you to come back for me. All my life I've waited..."

"I'm sorry. It was safer for you this way," she told me. "Your father knew but nobody else. We agreed it would be best."

"But why?" I took a step towards her.

"It's too long a story to explain now, William. You must come with me and I'll tell you everything." She held out her arms again. I wanted nothing more than to do as she said, but still something niggled at me. I sent a questioning thought towards that impenetrable aura of hers. It was definitely her! I could see her memories, could feel them. I saw myself as a baby – she was looking down at me and she loved me so much. Smiling, I began to walk towards her when, from behind me, I heard a desperate shout.

"William! NO!" I recognised Uncle Walter's voice, and hesitated. I had been so intent on meeting my mother that I had forgotten that one of my family watched over me at all times, day and night. They worked in shifts, but tonight it had been Uncle Walter's turn; he must have followed me up here.

"Ignore him," my mother said. "He doesn't know I'm still alive. He won't understand..."

"Then we can explain to him," I said, confused.

"We don't have time," she whispered. She was so close now that I was just inches from her outstretched hand. I reached out, and was close to touching her and being reunited with her, finally, after so many years, when my feet suddenly gave way beneath me and something extremely large and heavy landed on top of me, pushing me away from what I wanted most in the world.

"Uncle Walter?" I rolled over in the dirt, and my Uncle got to his feet and stood between me and my mother.

"It's okay, it's Mom. It's Dana," I told Walter urgently. "She wasn't killed – Mulder knows all about it."

"She's one of them, William. Surely you of all people can see that?" Walter said desperately, pushing me back as I tried to sidestep him.

"No...she's not..." I shook my head vehemently.

"William, I was with Mulder when he buried your mother. I saw her body. She was dead."

"You're wrong!" I cried. "She has my mother's memories!"

"Borrowed memories," Walter told me. "She's a super soldier, William – she has your mother's memories in the same way that Billy has memories from his life as a human being but that doesn't mean he's the same person he once was and neither is she."

"I don't believe you!" I yelled, but I knew that even if he had been telling the truth it wouldn't have mattered to me – she looked, talked, walked and sounded like my mother, and she still had some of my mother's memories and that was good enough for me. My emotions clouded out any good sense. I was no longer the being of incredible power who had summoned the entire world to his side to fight in a final battle to save our planet; I was just a 10-year-old boy who longed to be with his mother and everything else was forgotten. This apparition in front of me had tapped into something buried very deep into my psyche, something I couldn't resist – it was almost as if I had been hot-wired to respond to her.

"Let him come to me," my mother said, her voice cold and imperative. She started to walk towards me, and I refused to run from her – and as long as I stayed, Walter wouldn't leave either. He tried to push me away, back towards our camp, but she was too fast and plunged towards me, her hand outstretched. I reached for it, but Walter got in the way. She gave a scream of pure anger and hit him with so much force that he was lifted high in the air and smashed into one of the boulders several feet away. I heard the sickening crunch of bones and knew immediately that he was badly hurt. He groaned, winded, and I was torn between

running to him and running away with my mother. He was my Uncle Walter, the father of my heart, but she...she was my mother, who I had longed to be reunited with for so many years.

"William," Walter hissed, pulling himself towards me on his elbows, his entire body racked with pain. "Run! Now! Go - get back to the camp!"

I hesitated – and in that moment she took her chance, lunged forward, and grabbed my hand. I gave a howl of pain and intense loss the moment her flesh made contact with mine; she wasn't human. I knew that the moment I touched her. The aliens had somehow created that false aura to deceive me but she was a super soldier, doing the bidding of her masters, utterly under their control. Her mind was a dark, smouldering pit of emptiness, and I saw that those memories of hers that had enticed me previously, were just mindless echoes from a past that she had no connection with. It wasn't her – my mother wasn't inside this body. I had lost her, all those years ago, just as my father had said, and this was just a puppet, pretending to be her. I tried to connect with my own energy, to protect Uncle Walter and myself but there was something about her touch that got in the way of my powers. I gave a howl of frustration but she was much stronger than me, and without my abilities I was just a small, 10 year old boy, fighting against an utterly ruthless killing machine. She pulled me along, dragging me behind her, with me screaming all the way, looking back at where Uncle Walter lay on the ground, his head weeping blood and his legs twisted underneath him. Into this nightmare, came a low, shaking voice.

"Let him go."

She stopped and turned, taking me with her, and I saw my father, his face gaunt and pale, a gun in his hand.

"Mulder...it's me," she said, and for a moment, as he heard those old, familiar words, said in an old, familiar voice, he faltered. "I've come back to help you," she told him, with a little smile. "You always did need my help, remember?"

"It isn't her, Mulder," I whispered, screaming inside as the grasp of her fingers on my wrist chilled me to the very bone. She was a dark, empty creature, programmed to destroy.

"Let him go or I'll shoot," Mulder said. "And the bullets in this gun are made of pure magnetite."

She stared at him. "You won't shoot me, Mulder. It's me, Scully. Your Scully. You won't shoot me," she insisted, backing away, taking me with her.

He didn't even hesitate; the sound of the gun firing boomed through the cold desert air. There was a high pitched scream, like an animal, and then the creature holding me fell to the ground, her body jack-knifing in pain.

"William, come here," my father said. I looked at her, where she lay on the floor. She wore my mother's face and she was in such terrible agony. "Now, William," my father said insistently. I could feel the tears streaming down my face as I ran into the cover of his outstretched arm. I could feel the comforting waves of his sheer humanity wash over me as I came into the protective circle of his embrace. He was a flawed, conflicted man, and while he

might not have been able to compete with the fantasy of the perfect parent that I had built up in my head about my mother, he was real, he was here, and he loved me.

"Stay here," he said, and then he walked over to where the super soldier bearing my mother's form was writhing on the ground, and stood over her, his gun raised. "You bastards," he whispered. "You couldn't leave her alone, even in death, could you? After all she'd been through...you couldn't let her rest in peace. When did you infect her? When you abducted her? Was it that long ago? Huh? Or was it some time later? When?" There was no reply. My father stood there, his chest heaving, gazing down at her. "When?" He whispered, his face crumpling. "Oh, Scully...when did they do this to you?"

"Mulder," Walter whispered, but my father raised his hand, silencing him. We watched as Mulder leaned down, placed his gun against that creature's head, and pulled the trigger. She gave another terrible cry and I knew that the sound sliced through my father's heart, but he stood firm, and pulled the trigger again, and then again. Finally, the creature went still...and a few seconds later a sound like a great sigh escaped from her lips, and something white and glowing emerged from her mouth. I watched as it fled out, visible only to me, paused for a second, merged with the energy patterns all round us briefly, and then was gone. I felt a sensation of profound peace, and heard one word echo in the air around us:

"Thank-you."

I realised then why my mother hadn't appeared to me in all the years since her death. I already knew that the alien virus that turned people into super soldiers caused huge disruption and disharmony to the fabric that connected all the living beings on the planet. Now I understood just why they were such an abomination; the process of mutation caused some small part of the original human's energy, soul, spirit – whatever you want to call it - to be left behind. My mother had never been truly dead any more than she had been truly living; instead she had been confined to a kind of nightmarish limbo. My father had just performed one final act that had set her free – and, however hard it might have been for him, for her it had been an act of kindness, and release.

I watched, as if from a great distance, as my father got up, the gun hanging listlessly from his hand, his eyes fixed on the body of the woman he had once loved so much. A low moan drew his attention away from her and within seconds he was at Walter's side. He knelt down beside Walter, and gazed at him thoughtfully.

"You're a mess," he commented. Uncle Walter snorted, remembering when he'd said those very words to Mulder. I realised that my father had waited a long time to be able to say them back to him. Mulder smiled, and gently checked Walter's injuries. I ran to Walter's side, but I could tell from his groaning and the anxious look in Mulder's eyes that he was seriously hurt.

"William, can you call a doctor from the camp?" He asked, and I nodded and was about to do just that when I was distracted by a sound like rumbling thunder. I glanced up, and saw, in the distance, the huge alien army, headed straight for us. Row upon row of super soldiers marched, a grimly determined look on each and every face, and I knew without any recourse to my special abilities that I was the sole focus of these killing machines.

"William – get the hell out of here. Get back to the camp!" My father ordered.

"What about Uncle Walter?" I protested, glancing over to where my beloved Walter lay, eyes half-closed, his face twisted in pain. Mulder grabbed my arm and pushed me away.

"The entire planet needs you. Nobody needs us. Now go!" He ordered, in a harsh voice.

"I need you," I whispered. "I need both of you." Behind me the ground was shaking with the footsteps of the soldiers.

"William...can you lift us back to the camp – all of us – using your powers?" Mulder asked me. I looked at him helplessly, but we all knew that I had never shown any ability to translocate in this way. I suddenly cursed my abilities – all these spectacular gifts and I couldn't do the one thing I really needed to be able to do. I was determined to try anyway, and I spread my arms, and surrendered myself to the growing energy that was whirling across the desert. Within seconds I was insubstantial, and I knew that I could travel like this...I could just allow the wind to blow me back to the camp...but I couldn't lift Walter and Mulder and take them with me. The super soldiers were so close right now that I could feel their rank, dark emptiness descending upon us. I knew I could extend that protective shield around Walter and Mulder – but I couldn't do that and get myself back to the camp, and I knew my shield wouldn't last long under the onslaught of this massive army now bearing down on us. My father could have fled back to the camp with me of course – he wasn't injured – but I knew that he would never leave Walter. My father is a man of many faults as he'd be the first to admit, but cowardice isn't one of them. He's a brave, loyal man, and he wasn't about to abandon an injured friend – least of all if he happened to also be in love with that friend.

"GO!" Mulder told me. "If you love us, William, you'll go. Please," he said. I'd never heard my father plead for anything in my life, and the urgency of his tone finally got through to me. With a cry of total despair, I fled into the wind, leaving them far behind me. I could still see them, long after I had gone. They were exchanging grim glances as I disappeared into the faint light of the new dawn.

"You ready for this, Walter?" Mulder asked. "You and me – one final stand. Like Butch and Sundance?"

"Can I be Butch?" Walter asked, in a hoarse, pain-filled voice.

"Sure you can," Mulder grinned.

"Then I'm ready." Walter managed a faint grin of his own, and Mulder stood up, planted himself in front of Walter's prone body, raised his gun, feeble protection though it would be against an entire army, and waited.

I arrived back at the camp, solidified into my human form again, and immediately found myself surrounded by people.

"It's time," I told them. I was filled with what I can only describe as a burning rage. First they had violated my mother, then they had hurt my beloved Uncle Walter, and now they were bearing down on my father with the intent of killing the two people I loved most. They had murdered my adoptive parents, despoiled my world, and disrupted the harmony of every

living thing on it. My anger, once it began, knew no bounds. It spilled out of my body and became a huge, mushrooming white cloud. I was suddenly all points in the world at once. I could see, quite literally, everything. I could see that great army bearing down on us, moving as if in time to an invisible drum, step after step synchronised and controlled by their alien overlords. At their heart was a dark, smouldering emptiness, stark and devoid of life. I could see my own army, gathered behind me; messy, untidy, full of millions of individuals, out of step, idiosyncratic, but gloriously, wonderfully human, teeming with life, humming and vibrating with energy, our interconnected threads merging into one massive white glowing ball.

People often ask me when I knew what I was going to do – whether I had planned and strategised it, and it's hard to make them understand that it just wasn't like that. Everything I had ever done, all my life, I'd done on instinct, and this was no different.

"Billy..." I knew that I had spoken, but the word boomed out and reverberated around me as if it had been said by someone 50 times my size. Immediately I found Billy's unmistakable aura of blank, slightly confused emptiness. "Billy – tell your people not to attack. Tell them I can give them their release," I said, my anger making my voice hard and implacable. "Tell them that this is their chance. If they fight their masters now, I can deliver them from their slavery. I can't give them their lives back, Billy, but I can give them their deaths."

I extended enough of my power to Billy that he could communicate directly with his fellow super soldiers, and, as he spoke, the entire army faltered fractionally. Frantically, I used that moment of hesitation to send my thoughts out to Mulder and Walter. Mulder was still standing, defending my injured Uncle Walter; the alien army was literally just a few feet away from them, but they didn't even seem to have seen them...no, that wasn't it; they had seen them – they just weren't interested in them. They were focussed on me and everything else was an irrelevance. I was the key. Without me our people stood no chance of defeating the aliens and they knew it. I felt a ripple pass through the alien army. Some super soldiers were fighting the control their alien masters had over them, and, winning that fight, they dropped their weapons and fell to the ground, waiting for their release.

At first I was heartened, and then I realised that it still wasn't enough, the alien army still totally outnumbered us. A cold wind blew above us, and, looking up, we all saw the giant alien mothership hovering overhead, attended by dozens of smaller sisterships. As we waited, in tense silence, a beam of light extended from the mothership's belly, and we watched as thousands upon thousands of aliens were transported down to the planet's surface to join the ranks of their army. They made no pretence of assuming human form – they came in their natural state, and a collective gasp of sheer horror went up from among my people. The aliens had so many tentacles that it was impossible to count them all and as they waved them we could see the rows upon rows of sharp spines that covered each one. What was frightening about them though wasn't so much their resemblance to a pit of snakes, or the vile stench that emanated from them...it was the dark, gaping maw at their centre, filled with sharp white teeth that snapped open and shut, open and shut, as if they wanted to swallow the entire world whole. They were truly creatures of everybody's worst nightmare – and I don't think that was simply a coincidence. They were just like the demons, monsters, and bogeymen that have peopled our nightmares, legends and fireside tales for all of our recorded existence. They were everything we've ever known in our collective unconscious to be evil, frightening, and wrong. I believe our race memory recalled our last meeting with these beasts and retained

their image forever more, enshrining it in our worst nightmares as a warning against these creatures.

Now their very wrongness was tearing apart the fabric of our world once more, disrupting the interlocking harmonies and slicing into the very threads of our existence, and still they kept on coming, row after row of them, landing on our soil, harming our world with their presence. I spread myself wide, formed a huge white cloud of gleaming energy, and then rose high into the air and surveyed both our armies. Mine, although eager and willing, was half the size of theirs.

"I need more help," I whispered, returning to my body.

"This is all we got," John told me. He and Monica were standing on either side of me, my faithful lieutenants. To John's right stood Hank and the main leaders of the Network, and to Monica's left stood Marita. Beside her was Gibson Praise.

An almighty roar distracted me, and I saw that the aliens had stopped marching and now stood, poised, right on the edge of the magnetite quarry. I knew they could come no further – they would not risk it. Instead they would try to find a way to entice me out. I was right – a few seconds later, one of the aliens stepped forward and my heart flipped inside me as I saw that he was holding my father and Uncle Walter in his long, coiled tentacles. He didn't speak, but I heard his voice inside my head, whispering, sibilant and cold.

"Come for them, or we'll kill them," he hissed, and to illustrate his point he drew one of his sharply spined tentacles across my father's back. I heard Mulder cry out in pain, and my anger flared, incandescent in the force of its fury.

I sent out one voiceless, booming command to my people:

"Clasp hands...let me draw on your energy...share it with me."

I took John and Monica's hands in my own and gave a shout of exhilaration as the combined energy of millions of human beings shot through me, expanding me just as it had done that day back in Mulder's library when I had shared Monica and Walter's energy. Now, I felt iridescent with power. I was, in that moment of time, the entire world. I was everyone, every living creature, every tree, every insect, every human. I was connected to everything in a way that was so profound and yet so simple.

It was my understanding of the way the world worked that was the key to what I did next. I had, after all, spent my entire life studying this beautiful world – I knew all its secrets. I soared out, sending my energy into the quarry, finding every single deposit of magnetite in every single rock and crevasse. I caressed the rock with my energy, felt myself tingle and burn with the touch of it, and it responded to me in the same way. It was like hot water meeting cold rock and a huge, hissing tide of steam rose up from the quarry and filled the air above. I felt my strength starting to fade with the enormity of what I was doing, and called on my people to give me the energy to complete my task. They rose to the challenge, concentrating hard, clasping their hands for all they were worth and sending their positive thoughts and all the energy in their combined life force to aid me. The aliens stood, waiting, watching, but not understanding. The entire quarry was now filled with steam; it rose in the air, an intense, concentrated mix of water vapour and liquefied magnetite. Still I continued to

pour myself into the rocks all around me, turning them to hot molten lava, and the steam rose even more furiously.

The aliens seemed, belatedly, to understand what was happening, and all hell broke loose. The aliens and those super soldiers still on their side, opened fire on us; the ships above us joined in, firing sharp, slicing laser beams into our midst, designed to kill, maim and destroy. I hastily erected the protective shield around my people, and deflected the laser beams away but now, with my energies concentrated on two different tasks, both offensive and defensive, I was fading again. I didn't have the resources to protect my people and continue to liquefy the magnetite. Dimly, I heard John order our people to fire, and magnetite bullets flew through the air towards our enemies but our weapons were pitifully few against such a large army, and I knew we couldn't hold them off for long. Their onslaught became stronger as they concentrated on piercing the protective shield I was holding above our people; they knew that if they just kept firing for long enough that my powers would start to fail me, and then we would be weak and defenceless, and they could move in for the kill. Once I was disposed of, it would be an easy matter to annihilate my army, and take over this world and every living creature in it.

"I need more – more..." I told my army, my voice fading with the strain of protecting them from the overhead assault. There was a faint surge, but they were exhausted too – I was draining them dry. I was overcome with despair; I saw the world dying around me, and me unable to stop it. Surely, it hadn't come to this? Surely, with all my powers, I should be able to keep my people safe? If not, then why had I been born with them? I gave a wail of pure desolation...and it was at that moment that salvation arrived.

"We'll help," piped up a voice I knew very well, and I saw Luke appear by his father's side.

"We might not have as much energy as living beings, but we have some and we want to help," Alex Krycek told me, materialising beside Marita.

"You bet!" said a voice I remembered as belonging to the little man who had appeared in my father's room when he was injured - Frohike. The three men my father had referred to collectively as the 'gunmen' materialised beside Krycek, and next to them was Samantha, smiling at me cheekily, clutching the hand of a white haired lady I knew to be my paternal grandmother. With them was Samantha's father, the man who had raised Mulder as his own son, and suddenly the entire place seemed to be filled with the faint, insubstantial auras of our dead. They came in their millions, in their tens of millions, in their billions, each of their individual lights like the moon compared to the blazing, sun-like auras of the living, but they added their power to our army, and I felt us becoming stronger by the second.

A lined, wizened old man materialised straight in front of me and I recognised my father's father, a man whose name was shrouded in mystery and deceit. His hands were trembling as he reached out and touched my arm.

"I want to help too," he said, his lined face creased with the enormous weight of his own contrition. "I made some terrible mistakes during my life...I'd like to help. I'll go if you don't want me but I'd like to stay."

"You can stay, Grandfather," I assured him, unconcerned about the black deeds he had done

in his life. Those were between him and his own conscience; I would not turn away anyone's help on this day.

Now, I was life and death as I soared into the sky once more, stronger than ever before. Now, instead of just defending us, I started to attack. I sucked the molten magnetite from the earth, trailing it behind me like a comet. I showered the alien vessels above us with the molten magnetite and they faltered and came to an abrupt halt, shuddering and screeching, before exploding in the sky and giving the millions of people below an impromptu firework display.

Feeling utterly exhilarated and totally invincible, I gathered in the vapour that I had released from the quarry, and called the storm clouds to me. They came, connected to me by the same threads that connected everything on the planet, and I sent them on their way, dark with rust coloured rain. The sky turned black, and thunder rolled across the desert. I returned to my people, buoyed up by their strength, and we watched as the heavens opened, and rained down a torrent of warm red water upon the earth. There was a silence, as the aliens struggled to comprehend what was happening, and then, as the magnetite began to burn them, they at last understood. The air was rent with the sound of their death cries and they writhed and screamed in the wet desert dust, the magnetite in the rain penetrating their skins, and killing them as surely as their lasers had been designed to kill humans. Amid the screams of pain were other cries too – and the air was alive with the whispered thanks of super soldiers who had been released from the prospect of eternal servitude to a race of cruel and inhuman masters. Many went to their deaths with smiles on their upturned faces, as they knelt in the dust and waited for the rain to kill them. I saw Billy, running out from the protective shield I had placed over us in order that he could meet his own death with his fellow soldiers.

The warm, rust coloured rains fell for hours and I felt my energy begin to fade. I was utterly exhausted from all my exertions, and at last I found myself returning to my body. I felt numb, weary beyond belief, and finally I was unable to keep the shield in place. We didn't need it any more anyway, as the rain posed no threat to us. Once the shield came down, the rain washed over us, warm and cleansing, making our clothes cling to our bodies and streaking our skins with rust. I fell to my knees, my head hanging down between my shoulders, beyond exhausted. My body felt heavy, old and tired compared to the lightness and joy of being that creature of pure energy. I was so tired that I couldn't protect myself from the rain, and it seared my skin, causing a sensation like a severe case of sunburn. Nobody else was affected, and to this day I don't know why magnetite burns me in this way; I think, somehow, that it was necessary for me to have this reaction to it in order to have been able to do what I did.

"William," Monica said, crouching over me in the wet desert dust, trying to shield me from the burning rain with her body. "Are you okay?"

"I'm just very, very tired," I told her, a sense of hysteria folding in on me in the wake of my exhaustion. "Why are you looking at me like that, Monica?" I asked, reaching out a finger to touch her rust streaked face.

"I was just remembering something," she told me. "Something from one of those books in Mulder's library." Her tone was awe struck as she quoted the passage to me: "*Saoshyant will purify both the wicked and the righteous by causing all to pass through a river of molten metal (obtained through the melting of the mountains). This experience will be pleasant for the righteous (like being bathed in warm milk) but agonizing for the wicked (until all sins are purged away).*" That's what you just did, William, in a way. You caused the aliens to pass

through a river of molten metal – it doesn't hurt us..." She held out her hand and caught a tiny puddle of the torrential rain in the palm. "Like being bathed in warm milk," she said.

I laughed – I couldn't help myself. I sat down in the middle of that quarry, surrounded by the billions of people, dead and alive, who had helped me, and I laughed. That it should come down to something this simple, that all my skills had been leading to this moment, when all I'd done to save an entire world was to make it rain. It was absurd and yet somehow so right. I laughed and laughed as the rain burnt into my skin, and washed away our enemies.

My laughter spread, rippling out through the threads and tendrils of light that connected us, and my army began to break up. They loosened their hands and began to dance and clap and sing; they were as weary as I was, drained of all their energy, and yet filled with the joy of triumph and release.

Then something magical happened. As I sat on the ground, watching my people celebrate, too dazed and weary to join them, I saw that the dead were dancing with the living. I had woven their auras together when I was feeding off their combined energies, and as a result, the living found that not only could they see the dead but they could hold them and converse with them too. I smiled, and urged them to make the most of it, for already the threads that bound us were separating out again and we were returning to our natural state. This moment wouldn't last for long but it was beautiful nonetheless. I have so many snapshot images of that day, most of them hazy, seen, as they were, through my exhausted eyes. I remember seeing a 9 year old boy being swung delightedly into the air by his father, as John Doggett was reunited with his son, Luke. I remember Marita sitting, soaked to the skin, her white blouse clinging to her slender shoulders, having an intense conversation with Alex Krycek. I remember my grandfather sitting side by side with Gibson Praise, a faintly astonished look on both their faces as the old man made a stumbling apology. And I remember something else – something completely unexpected, something I only ever told two other people about before now.

As I sat there, in the desert, in the pouring rain, I felt someone approach. I smelled her before I saw her – there was the faintest hint of jasmine and apple in the air. I looked up, to find her standing there, bathed in the faint, almost translucent white glow of the dead.

"William," she said.

This was true and real – it wasn't a trick. This was my mother. She was more insubstantial than the other dead people, and I knew that this was because she had only recently fully passed over.

"Mom." I tried to stand, unsteadily, but I was too weak, and she stopped me, her blue eyes glowing with tears. Now I wondered how I could ever have mistaken that cold, empty super soldier for my beautiful mother – she had worn my mother's face, but she could never have copied my mother's strong, resonating aura. Dana Scully sat down next to me and took me in her arms and I wept with joy as I finally experienced the one moment I had been waiting for all my life.

"I'm so proud of you," she whispered, wiping the wet hair out of my eyes. "I love you so much. Never forget that, will you?"

"No. Never." My face crumpled as I reached out and touched her beautiful porcelain white face, and she smiled at me.

"Tell your father to let me go and find his happiness where he can," she whispered. "He deserves that. He's a good man, William."

"I know." I nodded, my tears blinding me. I clung to her and told her everything about my life, about my love for her, and she listened and stroked my hair. I wanted that moment to go on forever but I knew that it couldn't. Finally, I ran out of words, and she drew away from me.

"I don't have the strength to stay - I'm too new. I must go," she told me. "Thank you, William; you were everything we could have hoped for and more. Farewell, my dear, dear son."

She kissed me and got to her feet. I saw another woman standing, just to one side, behind her; a very pretty woman with long red hair and a wide Scully smile who I knew immediately to be my aunt Melissa. Melissa was carrying my old playmate, Emily in her arms and behind her stood a dark haired lady, and a bald man with just a few tufts of red hair; my maternal grandparents. My mother took Emily in her arms, and I was happy for her that she would, finally, have the chance to take care of the child she had always longed for. The Scully family surrounded my mother, their pale auras merging into one, smiled at me, sent their love...and then disappeared. I sat there for a long time, warmed by the quiet joy of the encounter, too tired and happy to move.

At some point, the rains began to subside. I was beyond coherent thought, but thankfully John quickly went into action, ordering Hank, Gibson and the Network chiefs to take care of our people, and see to any of them that had been injured in the battle. Then John turned to me.

"You okay, William?" He asked, bending down beside me. "You look beat, buddy, and your skin looks raw. We need to get you to a hospital. Want me to carry you?"

"Yes...no! I need to find my father and Uncle Walter. Walter was hurt..." I tried to get up, but my body wasn't obeying my commands any more and I fell right over again.

"Hold on. We'll find 'em," John said. "Monica, Gibson – find us a doctor." John picked me up, and I put my arms around his neck so that he could carry me more easily. "Seems to me that last time we saw them they were up there, on the edge of the quarry," John said. I nodded, and tried to send my thoughts out to locate them, only to find that my powers had, for now at least, completely disappeared. The truth is that they never did come back the way they were before. I think maybe that I burnt myself out that day in the desert – or maybe I was never supposed to keep them; they had reached a pretty frightening degree by the end after all. I can still spent hours staring at an ant crawling across the ground, and I can still see the interconnected threads that bind us. I can still reach into people's memories and catch their thoughts – but I can't transform myself into a glowing ball of energy any more, and for that I'm actually pretty grateful!

It was almost impossible to see where we were going – the desert was littered with bodies and the remains of the alien spaceships. I looked around despairingly – how would we ever find them? At that moment, a tall, thin woman surrounded by a halo of white light appeared in front of me.

"This way," she whispered, and I told John, who could not see her, what direction we should go in. We followed her through that stinking battlefield, and up the side of the quarry. She led us towards the shelter of some rocks, and then gestured with her hand.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"You're welcome. He's my son," she told me proudly. "Tell him I love him," she added, and then she disappeared.

John rounded the corner, and I gave a cry of relief as we found my father and Walter sitting in a veritable sea of dead aliens, their raw, wet flesh fetid and stinking. Mulder was cradling Walter in his lap, his arms wrapped tightly around the big man as he talked furiously in Walter's ear, trying to keep him from falling into unconsciousness.

"Don't you dare die on me, Walter Skinner," he was saying as we approached. "Don't you dare fucking die. You promised didn't you, huh? When I told you that everyone else had died on me you told me that you hadn't, and you wouldn't. You promised, goddamit, you sonovabitch and I'm holding you to it. You can't die, Walter. I need you too fucking much. You know that. I love you, Walter. I fucking love you."

Walter was teetering on the brink of unconsciousness, but he did manage to reach out, take Mulder's hand in his, and squeeze.

It felt wrong, strange, for Uncle Walter to be lying here, so badly hurt. He had always been the big, strong, in charge one. He'd always known what to do and how to help us when we were hurting, and now he was the one in pain. John put me down next to them, and Mulder's face lit up when he saw me. He looked terrible, his shirt half hanging off his thin body, his clothes wet through, his face streaked with rust, and a long, weeping, purple weal across his back where the alien had hurt him. Walter looked even worse – his glasses had been smashed to pieces when he fell, and his face was covered in little scratches. Blood poured from a wound on his forehead, and his skin was grey, and haggard. Both Mulder and Walter were shivering; they were in shock as a result of their injuries and the stress of all they'd been through and the warm rain had cooled on their bodies, chilling them. Mulder reached out and wrapped a hand around the back of my neck to draw me close, and we rested our foreheads against each other for a moment.

"Thank god you're alive, William," he whispered. "I can't lose either of you. I told Walter that. He understands that, don't you Walter?"

Walter gave a hazy smile, and I kissed his blood stained cheek. "I'm sorry – this happened because of me," I whispered, horrified.

"Did you just save the world?" Walter asked me, in a croaking voice. I frowned.

"I guess," I muttered.

"Then you're pretty much forgiven anything right now," he said, and it was such a typical Walter comment that I couldn't help smiling.

"Walter – just hang on, buddy," John said. "Monica is bringing a doctor. Just hold on."

"I was chasing after you, calling your name, but you didn't stop..." Walter whispered to me, his eyes going out of focus. "She wasn't your mother, William."

"I know that – I didn't hear you, Uncle Walter...I was concentrating too hard on her." I looked up at Mulder. "How did you know where we were?" I asked him.

"I guess you're not the only one with a few extra sensory skills," he replied, with a chuckle. "Where's that medical help, John?" He looked up anxiously, his arms wrapped tightly around Uncle Walter, keeping him close, trying to warm his rain drenched body as best he could.

"It's comin'" John said, talking into his cell phone. "It's coming."

"Christ, speed it up. He's dying here!" Mulder said, and I knew he was right – I could feel Uncle Walter slipping away. I took his hand.

"I saw your mother," I told him. "She led me to you. She said to tell you she loves you." He closed his eyes, but I knew that he had heard me as he faded into unconsciousness with the faintest hint of a smile hovering on his lips.

I remember once wondering who took care of Uncle Walter – and the answer, when it came to it, is that we all did. He had been our rock throughout, and now that he was so badly injured we rallied around him. Monica didn't just bring a doctor – she brought an entire ER team with her. God knows how she found them but I later heard that our people had intuitively known what to do in the wake of the great battle. They organised themselves into teams according to their gifts, and thus it was that the medical people had found each other and were even now going around giving medical assistance. Those in the military had brought with them whole mobile hospitals, and hundreds of chefs and cooks had gathered together and were starting to get everyone fed. Gibson co-ordinated them, ensuring that all those who had stood with me in the Nevada desert that day were taken care of.

John managed to get one of the helicopters circling overhead to land and the medical team accompanied me, Walter and Mulder into the 'copter and off to the nearest hospital.

"Don't you worry about a thing down here," John said to me, surveying the tidal wave of people, the dead, stinking mounds of aliens, and all the other detritus of the final battle. "Monica and me'll sort things out here. We'll get these people and animals safely back to their homes just as soon as we can."

As it turned out, there was, inevitably, a good deal more to be sorted out than that, but John and Monica were in their element and took care of it. To be honest, there was nobody else who could take care of it. The President and a considerable number of our other politicians had been aliens and they were now all dead. The entire world was in disarray as people tried to come to terms of what we had just lived through, and John and Monica were pivotal in getting things up and running again with the minimum of fuss. It helped that they were my closest friends – after having seen me in action, people were mighty wary of doing anything that might upset me, which will seem absurd to all those who know me but that initial element of fear proved very useful at first in getting the world straightened out.

I spent several days in the hospital recovering both from exhaustion and from the burns on my skin. I refused to be separated from Uncle Walter – although I wasn't alone in that as

Mulder refused to be separated from Walter too, so they just had to find a room that was big enough for all three of us. My exhaustion was so absolute that I was unable to get out of bed for the first few days. I was still feeling the after effects of that monumental battle a year later, and even now I sometimes have days when I'm too tired to move. I'm fine with that – that's the price I paid for all the many wonderful gifts that were given to me and I'm not complaining.

Uncle Walter was in a coma for three days and it was touch and go the whole time whether he would pull through. Mulder never once left his side and I spent most of those three days when I wasn't sleeping just staring at Uncle Walter were he lay in his bed, grey faced and badly wounded.

I was awakened from a deep sleep on the fourth day by a noise that was like music to my ears; it was the blessed, all too familiar sound of the two people I loved best in the world arguing.

"I'm just saying that I think Sundance was way cooler, that's all," Mulder was saying.

"Yeah, but Butch got the girl," Walter replied in a croaking voice, and I sat straight up in bed at the sound of his voice.

"Yeah, that may be so, but Sundance got Butch," Mulder said slyly. "So I don't think he did too badly either."

Walter gave a snort, and then a short bark of laughter that descended into a wheeze, and surrendered the point.

"Uncle Walter!" I scrambled out of my bed, and immediately swayed as the room swam all around me.

"Hold on, William," Mulder said, getting up and grabbing me before I fell. He carried me over to Walter's bed and sat me down beside the big man. "I think someone's pretty keen to see you," he said with a grin.

"Uncle Walter you're awake and arguing with Mulder again. Does this mean you're not going to die?" I asked him. Uncle Walter took one look at Mulder and they both burst out laughing – although Uncle Walter had to stop pretty quickly because he was still weak and hazy and it hurt him inside.

"The kid knows us too well," Mulder sighed. "So, Walter, does this mean you're going to live?" He asked, a wide grin on his face. Uncle Walter considered the matter for a moment.

"Well, we fought off the aliens, the world's been saved, and the two people I love most are right here with me, so, y'know, I think I'll stick around," he told me in a low, rasping voice.

I grinned, and then, to my total delight, Mulder leaned over me, and bestowed a brief, gentle kiss on Walter's lips. The air fizzed around them, and even in my weakened condition the colours emanating from that kiss were so bright that it didn't take any effort at all to see them. I sensed a change in Mulder. He was still volatile and moody, still brilliant, quick witted, intuitive and smart, but now he was also at peace with himself. Something had changed when

he had been forced to kill the super soldier masquerading as my mother, and I think that when he'd realised that he might lose Uncle Walter, he had come to understand just how much he loved him. In the quiet of the hospital room, I told Mulder and Walter about my meeting with my mother after the battle, and I think it had a profound effect on them both. I passed my mother's message onto my father; he didn't say anything – he just gave me a bright, brittle smile that hid a multitude of feelings, but later, when he thought I was asleep, he crawled into the hospital bed beside Walter, wrapped his arms around him, and held him for the rest of the night.

So, we've nearly reached the end of the story of my childhood; nearly – but not quite. I should tie up a few loose ends, and say who did what next. Of course I was only 10 years old when we fought the aliens, so technically speaking I had a good few years left of my childhood, and I definitely used them to make up for lost time. Immediately after our release from the hospital, we went to live in, of all places, the White House. We didn't really have a lot of choice – I was the only leadership figurehead left and no matter how much I tried to be a 10 year old boy, all people tended to remember was the massive, glowing being of pure energy who had fought off the alien invaders. Walter, Mulder, John and Monica were pretty famous too. Even Hank has been the subject of innumerable documentaries and biographies.

John and Monica got married in a ceremony that was covered by every single magazine in the entire world, much to John's disgust. I'm sure you'll all remember his look of pure panic when he thought Walter had lost the wedding ring just as Monica arrived at his side for the ceremony to begin. Needless to say, Walter was just teasing him, but that picture made it into thousands of magazines all over the world.

John returned to the FBI as Director, while Monica stayed at the White House to help run the interim government with Mulder and Walter – and, nominally at least, me. I wasn't much interested in governing anything though – I preferred to spend my time playing with kids my own age, mostly, although not exclusively, live children. I went to school for the first time in my life, which wasn't easy as I was such a celebrity but I insisted on it. I wanted to have as normal a life as would ever be possible. And really, it has been possible to lead something of a normal life. I don't need protecting, after all – I have powers enough left to protect myself if anyone should try and harm me. I'm recognised wherever I go, but I don't mind that – I've always loved feeling connected to the world, so to me it just seems that there's a sea of friendly faces greeting me whenever I step outside the door.

I was right about what I said to Monica all those years ago though. I love every single living being on this planet, but I'll never join in that beautiful dance that two people do when they're in love with each other. I'm just not supposed to reproduce – genetically speaking, I think it would cause a problem in our gene pool. I've never wanted to either – I've been more than compensated by all the wonderful things I can see around me. I can still spend two days sitting staring into space, but people are used to me and all my strange ways.

Monica, Walter and Mulder ran the government for awhile, but Mulder wilted under the strain of having to be diplomatic so much of the time, and Uncle Walter felt he'd contributed enough to the world, frankly, and wanted to retire while he was still young enough to enjoy himself. They live very happily in a beautiful house in a remote location whose whereabouts I'm absolutely forbidden to divulge. I spent the rest of my childhood with them, and still only

feel really happy when I'm within hearing distance of their many arguments. Luckily those arguments are more light-hearted these days, but they still bicker the whole time. I'm convinced it's just because they like making up so much afterwards but with two such strong personalities you'd have to expect that there'll always be fireworks. Mulder has talked me into going on one final mission with him – he wants us to go to Mount Ararat and see if we can find that spaceship he's always talked about. Uncle Walter says he's crazy, but I think I'll go. It might be interesting!

Monica took to politics amazingly well, and is now not only the happy mother of a beautiful baby girl called Dana, who I love to pieces, but is also running for President next year. Monica's already shown that she's more than capable of doing the job so I wouldn't be at all surprised if she was elected. Hank, Marita, and Gibson are all doing well – I see them regularly and love them all dearly.

As for me – all kinds of ridiculous myths have grown up about me. Hopefully I've managed to dispel most of them in this narrative. I do my best to dissuade people from forming religious cults with me as their centrepiece – I've never been comfortable with people worshipping me; it strikes me that it interrupts the normal flow of energy and concentrates it unhealthily in one place. I wasn't the only one who has had to struggle with that. You have no idea how amusing it was to see my father open an invitation to attend the opening of *The Temple Of The Blessed Fox – Father of the Resurrector* in China. Needless to say that was one of many invitations that he turned down. The little interim government comprised of John, Monica, Walter, Mulder and myself (with me doing more cycling around the White House lawns than any actual governing it must be said!) placed the greatest emphasis on getting democratic institutions back in place as quickly as possible and allowing people to get on with their lives – not quite the lives they knew before that day in Nevada, but maybe something a little bit better.

The events that took place in Area 51 gave the world the breathing space to fix some of the problems that had been festering for a long, long time. I like to think that something good and redemptive arose out of the horror of that whole event. We're dealing with the problems of poverty and hunger, and I'm leading the way in addressing the issue of environmental degradation, which is a project dear to my heart for obvious reasons. The world has become a better, kinder, cleaner place since our battle with the aliens and I hope we can keep it that way. There's nothing like fighting an outside enemy to make all the people of the world unite, and appreciate what we have in common rather than dwelling on our differences. Now that so many people have experienced the wonder of seeing the world through my eyes, understanding how interwoven all life on this planet is, it's changed our perceptions irrevocably. We have different priorities now and that's a good thing.

I don't interfere with world events, but strangely enough there hasn't been one war in the years since we fought the aliens. Monica says they'll start up again when I die, but right now I serve as the ultimate balance in the world, and the world needs that, I think. It was so badly scarred by what happened that it needs several years of peace in which to heal and rebuild.

On the subject of me dying, I will eventually. I'm not immortal, and I fully expect to grow old and die like everyone else. I have to make a big point of reminding people of that fact, because so many of the myths foretelling my coming made such a big deal of my powers of resurrection. I honestly can't bring people back from the dead. I didn't bring anyone back from the dead in the final battle either; the dead came and helped us, voluntarily, and people

were only able to see them because of the way I interwove all our energy together on that day. The dead are always with us though – I still see Luke, Samantha, and Emily regularly. I've even held some interesting conversations with my paternal grandfather, and, very occasionally, I'm lucky enough to spend some time with my mother. However, the plain truth is that the dead honestly do have better things to do than spend all their time with the living. They came and helped us out during our moment of crisis, but now the natural order of the world has been restored and they aren't a visible part of our daily existence any more. I, of all people know how distressing it is to lose a loved one, but I can't bring anybody back – I get a sack load of mail every day asking, but it just isn't within my power. Whenever I despair and ask Monica why on earth people think I can raise the dead, she just reminds me of one of the many texts written about the Saoshyant, or Adam Kasia or World's Child, and urges me to be patient with people.

"According to the Avesta, he renews the world and resurrects the dead," she quotes under her breath whenever I get myself worked up about it, and I have to smile, and remember that we all want to cling to a little bit of hope that our loved ones might one day return to us. I haven't forgotten how nearly we lost the battle because of my desire to see my mother.

I lived in the White House for four years, and it still never ceases to amaze me how this little kid from a dirt-poor ranch in Wyoming grew up to live in such an illustrious place. For the first few weeks I felt I should wear a suit and tie just to go to bed – everything was so plush and beautiful.

I'll always remember waking up one night a few days after I moved in there with Uncle Walter and Mulder. Uncle Walter had just been given the all clear by his doctors, and we'd celebrated with a big meal at which I'd had my first sip of alcohol and hadn't liked it at all – I've never liked anything that dulls my senses; they're far too finely tuned. I woke up a few hours later to hear Mulder and Walter arguing in the next bedroom.

"I don't see why I have to be the first lady," Mulder was grumbling. "First I'm the Prom Queen, then I'm Sundance, who, let's be honest, is the more girly of the two – he sure as hell has the more girly name anyhow - and now you're saying I should be the first lady! I'm definitely sensing a pattern here. Besides, I think you'd make a better first lady."

"I don't look good in a hat. It's the lack of hair," Walter said, and I could imagine him keeping a perfectly straight face as he spoke.

"And you think I'd look good in a hat with this nose?" Mulder demanded. I giggled to myself as I turned over and closed my eyes again.

"C'mere," Walter said, laughing, and I felt a huge fizz of energy literally spark through the walls as they embraced. I tried very hard not to eavesdrop but I'm afraid it's one of my vices. Besides, I couldn't help it because there was an amazing firework display going on all around me as their auras merged. The air was crackling and lights were flashing and the entire White House was surrounded by a deeply glowing burst of energy that was so bright that I'm sure it could have been seen from outer space. I sat up in bed, wondering what the hell was going on, and then settled back down again with a satisfied smile as I realised: Uncle Walter and Mulder were dancing. They were finally dancing, for the first time, after all these years. It was, as I'd always predicted it would be, an infinitely complex dance. There were layers of sadness that just served to underscore the essential joy of the event, and little dips and ebbs

and flows in the choreography that told of all the many life experiences they brought to this dance.

Mulder's little kisses along Walter's collarbone fizzed in the air like dragonflies, bright and colourful; Walter's caressing fingers made tumbling, spiralling patterns in the air that shone like stars as he gently stroked Mulder's hair. Their dance was dizzying in its complexity and meaning; these two men had loved each other for years, had overcome innumerable obstacles and much sadness to finally reach this point, and it was as if the entire planet knew how important this moment was.

Mulder radiated colours of bright, spangled gold and silver, while Walter was a steadier, dark navy, shot through with streaks of vivid royal blue. Their colours merged and separated, merged and separated, flirting and chasing into the air and then sliding back together again until finally, in a moment of the most beautiful tenderness, they began to merge more deeply. Walter's dark tones became vivid with Mulder's bright ones, and Mulder's glistening golds and silvers were made stronger and given more depth by Walter's shades of blue. It was mesmerising and I watched, transfixed. This dance had more meaning than any other I had ever seen...and as I gazed at the amazing pyrotechnic display lighting up my room, I noticed something I hadn't picked up on before: Mulder's demons had faded. They were still there, but it was as if they had shrunk. Now they were unable to withstand the dizzying onslaught of this dance, and they faded even more, becoming so faint as to be almost insubstantial. I smiled quietly. If any man deserved happiness it was my father, after all that he had been through, and if there was any man I wanted to share in that happiness it was my Uncle Walter, who had loved and protected me all my life.

I watched that dance for the rest of the night, and finally, just before dawn, their colours subsided into a peaceful swirling melody of contentment. I put my head down on the pillow and smiled to myself as sleep claimed me, knowing that tonight, for the first time in a very long time, everything in the world was in perfect harmony.

The End