

Worst Nightmares by Xanthe

<http://www.xanthe.org/worst-nightmares/>

He heard the sound of a key in a lock and was ushered through a door. Then another key, another lock, another door. He lost count. The blindfold was itchy over his eyes and his arms were handcuffed behind his back. Still his captors did not speak. They had not spoken once - all the commands they needed to give were unspoken - a kick to the back of his legs, a rough hand on his shoulder or a shove to the small of his back. He obeyed them quietly, without fuss, not a man used to making a fuss about anything, not even his own abduction. He tried to think the whole thing through calmly, but even so, he came to no conclusions. What could they possibly want with him? He ran through a list of enemies in his head - he had some, admittedly, but they were hardly the sort who would go to such lengths to trap and imprison him. A swift bullet to the stomach or head maybe, but not this elaborate charade. He tried to think back, to the years when his work had been more immediately dangerous, more involved with the criminal fraternity he had hunted down and brought to justice, but even there he drew a blank. What was all this about? What use was he? Something stirred in his mind and he took a deep breath. Was that it? But why?

It was colder now and he guessed they were a long way below ground. Another lock, another key, a harsh metallic sound - bolts maybe. Then he was shoved again and nearly tripped as he was pushed into a room. He felt the handcuffs being removed and took his chance, swinging round, in the dark still, trying to remove the blindfold and attack his captor at the same time but his fist made contact with thin air and he heard a laugh and a clanging sound as a door was shut behind him. "Careful." A voice warned. "Next time we might decide to leave the handcuffs on." He was still for a moment, trying to get his bearings, sure that his captors had gone and then he reached up and undid the rough woollen scarf that covered his eyes. For a while he noticed no change. It was so dark down here that it took some time before his eyes began to see anything. Then he realised, without surprise, that he was in a cell. There was a stinking toilet in one corner and two bunks, without bedding. A tap next to the toilet constantly leaked a trickle of running water. A dull groan caught his attention and for the first time he realised he was not alone. One of the bunks, sunk deep in the gloom, had an occupant. He moved towards the bunk and peered down at the man.

"Mulder?" He guessed it was him although it was none too clear. He vaguely made out some bloodstained hair and a pale, bruised face. One lip badly swollen, an eye closed, a cut along the cheekbone and a purple stain along the jawline that made him wince. "Mulder?" spoken more softly, seating himself down on the bunk beside the other man. "I should have known!" He almost laughed but the sight of Mulder's injuries was too shocking. A thin sheen of sweat covered the young agent's face. "Mulder?" He reached out a tentative hand and got an immediate reaction. Mulder screwed his body into a foetal ball and screamed.

"Don't touch me! Please! I don't know anything. Please, please." The man was terrified and his whole body was racked with pain.

"It's alright." He withdrew his hand and went over to the tap, running his handkerchief under the water and bringing it back over to the bunk. "It's me, Mulder," he whispered. "And I'm not going to hurt you. Can you look at me?"

Mulder opened his good eye cautiously and peered up.

"Who...?"

"Me. Skinner." Mulder's hands were galvanised into action, grasping his shirt.

"You've got to get out. You've got to get out of here now, sir."

"Yes, Mulder. I wish that were a possibility." Skinner glanced wryly at the locked door.

"You're here to rescue me?" Mulder asked.

"No. I didn't even know you were missing." Skinner admitted. "How long have you been here?"

"A day, two days. How can I tell?" Mulder waved his hand as if gesturing at the darkness itself. "A lifetime maybe. It feels that long."

"No. Just a day or two. That makes sense." Skinner nodded. "Will you let me help you?" He asked. "I'll try not to hurt you."

"Everything hurts." Mulder's good eye shone too brightly, feverishly and Skinner wasn't sure he had even heard him.

"Here." He placed the handkerchief gently along the cut on Mulder's cheekbone, mopping up the blood, feeling the unnatural heat radiating from the man. "You're burning up." He looked around the cell but found nothing that could be used as a receptacle for water. Instead he cupped some in his hand and brought it over, trying to angle it into Mulder's mouth. It took a few goes before any of it found its destination. Most of it just trickled down Mulder's chin and into his shirt. "Are you injured anywhere else?" He asked, sure that the bruises on Mulder's face could not be responsible for the man's high temperature. Mulder moved his head.

"Everything hurts," he murmured again, as if unable to localise a pain that was simply everywhere.

"You want me to see if I can help?" Even as he said it, Skinner knew that any help he could give was limited to applying water, trying to keep Mulder's fever down, washing wounds to prevent infection but he supposed it was better than nothing. Gently he undid the buttons

on Mulder's shirt and bit on his lip as he saw the livid bruises on the other man's chest and stomach. Someone had used him as a human punchbag. Skinner fought down a wave of rage. Anger was of little use to him right now, he would save it for later when it could be directed with more purpose and in the right direction. He hoped none of Mulder's ribs were broken and ran his fingers along them to check. He had seen some bad injuries in his time. In Vietnam he had spent 3 days holed up in the jungle with a friend whose leg had been blasted to smithereens. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the sense of déjà-vu, of re-visiting one of the worst experiences of his life. Mulder's ribs seemed okay. He breathed a sigh of relief, hoping there were no internal injuries he could not see.

"My back." Mulder moaned.

"Alright. I'll take a look." He put a hand under Mulder's shoulder to lift him and the other man let out a yelp of pain. Skinner felt a warm stickiness on his fingers and drew back, smelling the raw blood before he saw it in the gloom of the cell. "Okay. Can you sit up? Take it slowly." He pulled on Mulder's shoulders gently until the other man was sitting, shivering and sweating at the same time, his shirt providing little warmth in the dank cell. Skinner eased the shirt from his shoulders, filled with revulsion as it stuck to the other man's skin, wondering what horrors it hid. Mulder's back was criss-crossed with deep cuts that could only have been caused by some sort of whip or even a chain. "Damn. Why lie on your back when it's been cut to ribbons?" He demanded angrily. Mulder's head lolled against his shoulder.

"Front hurts too much." he murmured. "Everything hurts. If I stay still it's not so bad."

"Alright. I'm going to clean you up." Skinner told him, speaking too tersely, trying to get a grip on himself. He wasn't angry with Mulder but whoever had done this to him. He wet his handkerchief again and cautiously dabbed at Mulder's wounds. Some of them were quite dirty - even in the gloom of the cell he could see that Mulder must have fallen onto a dusty floor, or worse, been kicked by someone's dirty boot. He cleaned the wounds as best he could, then took his coat off and tore it into strips, his anger making him strong enough to rip apart the seams with ease. He used it as a makeshift bandage, then he put Mulder's shirt back on him and buttoned it up gently. It was all he could do. He immediately missed the warmth of his coat in the damp cell but it seemed a better use of resources for it to be wrapped round Mulder's injuries than warming his own back. He got up and returned to the tap, washing his hands and running the water over his face. Then he returned to Mulder's bunk. "Mulder, why have they done this to you?" He asked. "And why did they bring me here?"

"What?" Mulder stared at him, his eye still feverish. "Scully," he murmured.

"She's safe. But, Mulder. Why?" He gave up. Mulder was muttering incoherently and he knew he wouldn't get any sense out of him anytime soon. He went over to the other bunk and sat down on it wearily. This was like his worst nightmare.

He had been imprisoned before, briefly, on a couple of occasions and he hated the feeling of helplessness that it engendered in him. He hated to feel enclosed, confined, out of control,

powerless. He fought down the growing panic with steely resolve. He needed a clear head if he was going to get them out of this. At last, having decided there was nothing he could do, he lay back down on the bunk with a sigh and closed his eyes. This was another skill he had learned in Vietnam. The ability to fall instantly asleep regardless of the situation, to get rest while it was available in case it was days before he had the chance to sleep again. He was awakened by a clanging sound as the cell door opened. Mulder let out a hoarse scream and screwed himself into that foetal position again, muttering and whimpering. Whatever he expected to walk through that door, he was terrified of it and that terror transmitted itself to Skinner who felt his stomach lurch. A man stood in the doorway, his face obscured by a mask. He didn't say anything, just lay a tray down on the floor and left again, locking the door behind him.

"It's okay, Mulder. It's only food." He said, going over to it and finding it was pretty basic food at that. A hunk of bread, some sort of meat. Nothing warm. He took the tray over to Mulder and offered him some. Mulder looked a little bit better - his good eye had lost that glassy look and his other eye, although bruised and bloodshot, had opened up.

"I thought you were a dream," he murmured, stuffing the bread hungrily into his mouth.

"No. I'm real. I wish you were a dream though. You look dreadful." Skinner told him.

"That's nothing to how I feel." Mulder sat up very cautiously.

"Mulder, what's all this about? Why was I brought here? Why did they do this to you? Who are they?" Skinner asked, trying to keep the impatience from his voice. What on earth was going on? And how had he come to be involved in it?

"I don't know what it's about. Not really." Mulder leaned back against the wall and then thought the better of it and leaned forward again.

"You must have some idea."

"Yes. It's about Scully."

"Scully?" Skinner looked up, anxiously. It had been less than a month since she had left hospital and only last week there had been an attempt to abduct her. Concerned for her safety, he had ordered that she stay in a safe house, a place that only he and Mulder knew the location of.

"They want her. Or at least, they want that thing I stole to put into her neck. They want to take it, sir. And if they do, she'll die."

"I know you believe that but..." Skinner had never been sure if it had been the microchip that had defeated Scully's cancer or the unconventional medical treatment she had undergone.

"It's true!" Mulder said desperately. "So I can't tell them where she is. And before you ask, I

don't know what they want with the chip. I don't even know who they are."

"Something to do with smoking man?" Skinner asked. "I mean I know he's supposed to be dead, but his people?" Whoever they are, he thought to himself.

"No. I don't think so. Someone else maybe? I just don't know. I don't understand any of this any more. I'm losing it." Mulder wasn't even making a self-deprecating dig, he looked like someone who genuinely had lost it. Skinner could still recall the way he had looked at the hospital a few weeks before, shocked and disturbed by the events that had torn him apart.

"So, they wanted to know where Scully was and you wouldn't tell them." Skinner mused, thinking this through.

"That's about it. So they thought they might be able to persuade me." Mulder shrugged and his face spasmed with pain.

"I take it they didn't succeed?"

"Would I be looking like this if they had?" Mulder shook his head. "No. There is no way Scully is going to suffer any more because of me. I won't tell them. They can kill me, I don't care. I don't care about any of it any more, just about Scully. Nothing else is important. I won't have her die because of me. That nearly happened and I won't, I can't live with it. If they find her, if they get that chip out of her neck, then I'll kill myself."

"Mulder calm down." Skinner said firmly. "You've been through a lot. You're not thinking straight."

"I've never thought straighter in my life." Mulder told him, a manic gleam in his eyes.

"So, unable to get the information they wanted from you, they thought they'd try me." Skinner mused.

"I suppose so." Mulder said. He looked up sharply. "Shit." He said succinctly.

"Yes. Shit." Skinner nodded. Mulder's face had crumpled up and he looked as if he was about to either cry or slam his fist into the wall.

"You'll tell them." Mulder said with some conviction. "I can't stop you telling them. I can't save her this time either. They'll get her, she'll die."

"God, you don't have much faith in me do you?" Skinner rounded on him.

"You don't understand. When it hurts this much you think you'll say anything to make them stop." Mulder told him.

"And you're the only one capable of being a hero, right?" Skinner asked.

"No. You just don't have the same incentive not to talk as I do."

"You don't know me very well then." Skinner said, turning away and going back to his bunk, sitting down with a sigh. "When I think of the times I've tried to protect the pair of you! Sometimes I wonder why I bother. You don't have a very high opinion of me, Agent Mulder."

"I..." Mulder pressed his thumb into the crumbs on the tray. "I'm never sure who we're dealing with," he said, licking the crumbs off his thumb. "You, or someone else."

"Me of course. Who else?"

"That depends on who you take your orders from." Mulder shrugged. "Scully thought you were involved in the conspiracy. That you might be manipulating us. And Blevins wanted me to name you as well."

"Did he?" Skinner mused. "And Scully really thought I was involved?"

"Yes."

"So no matter how many times I come through for you, it doesn't make a difference?"

"I didn't name you at that enquiry. I could have done." Mulder shrugged.

"I'm touched." Skinner made a face. "So you didn't implicate me in something I'm not involved in anyway and I'm supposed to feel grateful now?"

"I don't care how you feel." Mulder lay back down on the bunk. "I don't care how anybody feels. I don't even care how I feel any more and believe me, I feel bad."

"Typical Mulder response." Skinner remarked. "Never giving a damn about anybody else, just your own egocentric view of the universe."

"Typical Skinner opinion." Mulder shot back. "Always on the other side. Always frowning down on me. You've never tried to see things my way."

"Never tried...? Oh give me strength." Skinner swung his feet over the side of the bunk, sitting up and glaring at his companion. "I've gone out of my way to save your ass on so many occasions I've lost count, Mulder. You may believe you're out there on the side of the angels, only concerned about the truth, but you've never once worked out that there is no one truth! There's a hundred different versions of it, all of them as valid as the other."

"No. There's what they tell us and what's real. The trouble is, I'm not sure I can tell the difference any more."

"Then give it up." Skinner told him. "Give it all up, Mulder. All this "us and them." All this black and white. Most of the rest of us live in a universe where the main colour is grey and

we have to tiptoe over eggshells to find what's right. Not you though. You crash around making a great loud noise so that everyone will look at you, not caring who you tread on or what you break to get at what you want."

"Like I said. Always on the other side." Mulder closed his eyes dismissively and Skinner had to fight back a very real impulse to hit him.

They heard footsteps in the corridor and then the clatter of a key in the lock. Skinner glanced at his companion and saw that he was trembling. A hooded man appeared in the doorway although Skinner had no way of knowing if he was the same one who had brought the food.

"Get up." The man got out a pair of handcuffs and fastened them behind Skinner's back. Then he took him away.

Mulder lay still, wishing he could sleep. He could hear the never-ending sounds of violence coming from the next door room. The shouts, demands for information, that incessant voice..."Where is she?" punctuated by the thuds and groans of a man being hurt. He flinched with each blow he heard, each cry, each long moan of agony. "Shut up, damn you. Shut up," he hissed, putting his hands over his ears. Then he heard a laugh, a bitter wailing sound and realised it was him. You're a liar, Fox Mulder, he told himself. You said you didn't care but you do. He lay back and tried to imagine himself in a different place, a place where the sun shone and birds flew overhead. A place where he got up in the morning and went to work and came back in the evening to a pretty wife and 2 adorable children. A regular life. A life he might have had if his sister's abduction had not sent him off on this endless search for a truth that was always elusive. Was Skinner right? Did the truth reside simultaneously in many different places, some completely contradictory? Inside himself there was a small nugget of fear. Fear that Skinner would crack and talk, fear that Skinner's deadly character analysis might be correct, fear of himself, fear of pain, fear of so many things he lost track of them all. The door opened and he closed his eyes, taking no notice as Skinner was returned to the cell, purposefully rolling over onto his side, turning his back so he wouldn't have to see. Skinner lay on the floor for a while, breathing heavily, then he got up, slowly. The twin emotions of pain and humiliation fought for dominance inside him and he raged with them for a while then conquered them. Mulder had his back towards him and he was grateful for that. He didn't want the other man to see him like this. It was degrading. He struggled over to the tap and turned it as far as it would go, burying his bleeding face under the flow of water, running his chafed wrists under the coolness and letting it soothe them. He wasn't hurt as badly as Mulder had been but then he hadn't been here as long as Mulder had been, he reasoned to himself. They had time. How long could he and Mulder take this sort of treatment? Was Scully's safety an issue he was prepared to die for as Mulder was?

"What did you tell them?" Mulder asked over his shoulder.

"Nothing," he growled.

"Then they'll be back."

The silence opened up like a chasm between them as each man nursed his wounds. What was there to say? Mulder thought to himself. What had he ever had to say to Skinner? Usually their exchanges were marked by his own defensive hostility as he subconsciously reacted to his boss as he had reacted to his father and every other authority figure he came across. His father had been a cold, distant man, their exchanges marked by a combination of buried affection and deep distrust. He couldn't remember a time when his father had ever taken him on a fishing trip, or played ball with him in the park. His dad had always been too busy with his high powered job and his sinister friends and after Samantha had been taken, he had never once looked at Fox again without the reproach showing in his eyes. Mulder could remember the nights spent sobbing in the darkness of his bedroom, wanting his father to just hug him, or even to come into his room and ask him how he was, to just show he cared about him in some way, but he never had. He had been glad to get away to England to study, as far away as possible from that tortured existence in a home that had become a prison with a family haunted by too many ghosts.

"Are you okay?" He was surprised to hear himself ask the question.

"No. How about you?" Skinner asked.

"I feel a bit better. It doesn't hurt so much now. The bandage helps," he said, surprised to find it was the truth, the ragged strips of Skinner's coat providing a wall between his own torn flesh and the hard steel frame of the bunk. "I hesitate to ask...but is there any hope of rescue?" He queried. His question was met by a short bark of mirthless laughter.

"I suppose there's an outside chance of it, but if I were a betting man I wouldn't be laying any money down." Skinner said. "At least they should have wondered why I haven't shown up for work which is a start. Tracking us down might take longer."

"And Scully? Maybe someone will go digging through your files while you're gone and work out where she is." Mulder said anxiously.

"I didn't write it down anywhere!" Skinner told him. "I'm not the completely incompetent half-wit you seem to take me for, Mulder."

"Never said that." Mulder smiled to himself.

"Nobody knows where she is except us. And nobody is going to find out either." Skinner told him. "Not from me, anyway." And he knew as soon as he said it that he meant it. He might not have worked as closely with Scully as Mulder had, but that didn't make any difference. Neither did the fact that his two most difficult and inspiring agents didn't trust him make a difference. They were his responsibility and for as long as he could remember, taking responsibility had always been the one thing he had been good at. He recalled the many times as a child when he and his mother had slipped off together to indulge their love of theater, a love-affair that the rest of the family did not share. And every time his mother had entrusted the tickets to him, sometimes handing them over weeks in advance of the trip, as soon as they arrived in the mail. "Walter will take care of them," she said. "Walter won't lose them." She had been a wild, scatty sort of person and he had adored her. It was

true that she probably would have lost the tickets within 5 minutes if she had kept them but even as a child he knew how to keep things safe. And now it was Scully he was keeping safe. He wished he could keep Mulder safe as well. He wanted to keep everyone under his jurisdiction safe. Once something had been entrusted to him it was his responsibility. He grinned wryly to himself. You're just a control freak, Walter, he told himself. Nothing more noble than that. You just like to keep everything straight, everything under control. No wonder Mulder drives you so mad. He won't stay still long enough for you to keep an eye on him. People like that are hard to protect.

"Damn." Mulder said suddenly, breaking the silence.

"What?" Skinner managed to turn his head, wearily.

"My fish. Scully usually feeds them when I'm away."

"Well I'm sure they can manage for a couple of days without food." Skinner tried to find some part of himself that could really engage empathetically with Mulder's fish crisis and failed.

"A couple of days, yes. But we could be here for weeks."

"And I always took you for an optimist, Mulder."

"An optimist? Me? No way." Mulder laughed. "How about you?"

"Me? I reckon I must be to have put up with you for as long as I have." Skinner muttered grumpily. He had a raging headache and his stomach ached from being punched too many times in one place.

"That makes you an optimist why?" Mulder asked dreamily, staring at the wall and tracing patterns on it with his fingers.

"In the hope that one day you'll stop being a pain in the butt." Skinner shifted onto his side, winced, and then turned onto his back, trying to find a position that didn't involve lying on a bruise. "Why do you have fish with your lifestyle?" He wondered out loud.

"I like them. They relax me. And they're pretty low maintenance. It was either fish or a relationship so I chose the easy option."

"Some people manage both."

"Not me. I don't want to be relied on. Fish don't rely on you. They don't ask you questions and wonder where you've been."

"And they don't love you either." Skinner pointed out.

"Who needs it?" Mulder closed his eyes and opened them again, not detecting much change

with them either open or shut. "It's dark in here," he murmured.

"Yes. Very dark."

"You can't tell if it's night or day. Which do you think it is?"

"I don't care."

"No. But guess anyway."

"Why?"

"Something to do."

"Day." Skinner said. "Happy now?"

"Oh yeah! Ecstatic."

"I always liked cats." Skinner mused. "While we're on the subject of pets and indulging in meaningless chit-chat. Very fond of cats."

"But you don't have one?"

"With the hours I work? No way. Any self-respecting cat would take itself off to live with someone else."

"Is that why your wife left you?" Mulder asked and then wished he hadn't. There was something about not being able to see someone that made you say more than you meant. He heard Skinner's sharp intake of breath. "I'm sorry. None of my business."

"It didn't work out. These things happen." But not to me, Skinner thought to himself. He hated the fact his marriage had failed. He hated to fail and he hated the fact that he had failed Sharon, that she was no longer in his care, no longer his responsibility. Ah, the "r" word again, Walter, he chided himself. You really are a control freak. "When I was a kid..." he paused staring blankly at the ceiling, wondering why on earth he was talking like this.

"Go on." Mulder was suddenly curious.

"When I was a kid, I was a stray cat magnet. Found one in the garage once, begged Mom to let me keep it. She was fine about it but we had to hide it from dad for 2 weeks and work on him to get him used to the idea. Then there was the one that followed me home from school...ugly thing, no tail but what a character! I cried for a week when that cat died. I adored him."

"My fish die." Mulder shifted onto his back. "All the time. Sometimes they get shot."

"What?" Skinner looked over at him for the first time and Mulder looked back, a smile on his

face.

"Yeah. People break in and there's a gunfight and the glass gets broken and they die."

"That's awful." Skinner said. "You shouldn't have pets if you can't look after them properly."

"You sound like my dad. He said we couldn't have any. That I wouldn't take good care of them. The stupid thing is... he was probably right. I didn't see it at the time but let's face it, my success rate with fish is pretty low."

"Maybe you should try a relationship after all." Skinner suggested.

"If I can't keep my fish alive what hope is there for a girlfriend?" Mulder shrugged, trying not to notice the bruises on Skinner's face.

"You don't have a girlfriend because you're scared of her dying?" Skinner asked incredulously. "Not a very good reason is it? And not, I suspect, the real reason."

"Who knows? Who cares?"

There were footsteps in the corridor and Skinner sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bunk, gazing at Mulder who was gripping his arms around his body, his face blankly scared. The door was unlocked and two men walked in, both hooded.

"Let us go." Skinner told them. "We won't tell you what you want to know."

"We think you will. Eventually. We just haven't hurt you enough yet." The man told him. There was no sense of pleasure or anticipation in his voice, just implacable intent. He fastened Skinner's wrists behind his back again and then crossed over to Mulder, pulling him off the bunk and handcuffing him as well.

"Don't bring him. He can't take any more. You'll kill him." Skinner said.

"We won't harm a hair on his head." The man told him. "He's just coming along to watch."

"What?" Mulder twisted frantically in the man's grasp.

"You know where she is and you can stop us hurting him at any time. Just by telling us." The man said. "It's up to you, Mulder."

"No." Mulder stared at Skinner and licked his lips nervously. It was one thing to overhear someone being tortured, quite another to be sat down and made to watch and still something else to be given the ability to stop it just by saying a few words.

"It doesn't matter, Mulder." Skinner told him softly. "You don't care remember? Hold on to that."

But I lied. Mulder thought to himself as they were bundled out into the corridor. I lied.

When he closed his eyes they slapped him until he opened them again. He watched in mute agony as they inflicted on Skinner the same torment they had inflicted on him two days previously, stripping off the other man's shirt, hitting him with a length of electric flex cabling which bit into his flesh and left bloody welts on his body. Skinner tried not to cry out, tried not to make Mulder's situation any harder but all the same sometimes he could not stop himself and a low moan would escape his lips and he would be angry with himself. One of the men sat beside Mulder, whispering insistently in his ear that he could stop it any time he wanted. Just by giving them the information they needed. At last he could bear it no longer. Skinner lay on the floor, covered in blood and no longer moving. If they carried on they would kill him, he was sure of that.

"Alright!" Mulder snapped. "I'll tell you."

"NO!" Skinner looked up with anguished eyes. Mulder turned away from him, speaking swiftly before Skinner could stop him. Then at last they were returned to their cell. Mulder retired to his bunk, leaving Skinner on the floor where they had left him.

"How long?" Skinner asked.

"What?" Mulder curled himself up into a ball, clutching his knees to his chest.

"How long do you think it will be before they realise you've sent them off on a wild goose chase?" he rasped.

"I was buying you time!" He said angrily. "Buying us both time. Someone might find us. There's a chance..."

"I thought you were a pessimist." Skinner managed a wry chuckle then pulled himself towards the tap.

"Only on good days. On bad days, and let's face it, this is one, I surprise myself." Mulder told him.

He didn't make it to the tap. He stopped somewhere half-way across the cell, propped up against his bunk. He thought he probably lost consciousness. Then he started shivering and that turned into great spasms that swept through his body in wave after uncontrollable wave.

"Stop that!" Mulder told him through gritted teeth.

"Cold..." His shirt was still back in the other room. His warm blood had dried on him, like sweat, cooling him down.

"I don't care." Mulder put his hands over his ears.

"That's what you said before. I don't believe you." Skinner bit down the cold and pain and with a huge effort of will stopped shivering. He stumbled to his feet and collapsed onto the relative safety of the bunk. Now he understood Mulder's dilemma the other day. Everything hurt, whether he lay on his front or back and he didn't have the strength to sit. This is my worst nightmare, he thought, revising his earlier estimate of what constituted his worst nightmare. Not the pain so much, but the helplessness, being out of control, unable to protect himself or Mulder, unable to do anything but suffer, and so humiliated. No shirt, exposed, in pain. Like an animal caught in a trap. No office, no clean clothing, none of the trappings of his power and authority, just himself at his most basic. Nothing to hide behind. Nothing concealed. Oh yes, this was definitely his worst nightmare.

"What's your worst nightmare?" He asked out loud, without even realising he had spoken.

"Being trapped in a room with my boss without any prospect of release." Mulder told him sourly.

"No, really. Tell me your worst nightmare," he said.

"Yes. Really. This is it." Mulder replied.

"I don't believe you. A man with your sort of gift for getting into unusual situations, you must have come across worse than this. What about some of those strange mutants you keep running into?"

"I love mutants. That's how I've come to meet so many." Mulder told him. "Perhaps if I could meet a mutant woman with some fish DNA then I could finally have that relationship."

"I think you're talking about mermaids." Skinner rasped out a laugh. "Never understood what it is with guys liking mermaids. They always seem to be rather...ill-equipped for having fun with."

"You probably have to have a thing for fish to understand it." Mulder said. "Your ideal woman's probably got whiskers and a tail and purrs like a cat. Are we rambling now?"

"Yes. Rambling..." Skinner closed his eyes and allowed the pain to take him away into a darkness even deeper than the cell.

Someone was crying. Even through the darkness he could hear it. A child maybe? His brother? His brother had nightmares and would whimper and cry until he went over to his bed and soothed him. Jamie was 5 years younger than he was and a nuisance, always following him around, wanting attention, wanting to play with Walter's friends. It was so irritating. "Walter will take care of Jamie." His mother said and he did because his mother had enough to do and he hated it when she looked tired and careworn. She was a woman who should be free, laughing, dancing around the kitchen, making them smile, but sometimes she just looked so tired, as if she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. He would do anything to take that look away and he wanted her to think well of him, to feel she could rely on him. But Jamie was so damn annoying! The sobbing continued until he

couldn't ignore it any more.

"Are you alright?" He got up and a wave of pain swept through him. Why did he hurt so much? Where was he? He saw Mulder's shrouded form on the other bunk, quaking with the effort of trying not to cry, the spasms jerking through his entire body.

"Go away." Mulder stuffed his hand into his mouth, wishing this was not happening. He guessed he had been on a rollercoaster for the past few weeks, what with Kritchgau's revelations, the hostility he had endured from Scully's brother, his own unbearable sense of guilt about Scully's illness. And now this. When was it all going to end? He wished they would kill him. He wished they would come in here, angry at being sent on a fool's errand, and take out a gun, hold it to his head and kill him. He felt a hand on his shoulder and wanted for one weak moment to give in and cling to someone, to sob and cry and be comforted but he gritted his teeth. Not Skinner. He didn't want Skinner to see his weakness. "I'm fine. Go away," he growled. The hand didn't move. He wanted to shake it off and he wanted it to stay there. This didn't happen. This never happened. He always cried alone, under cover of the darkness. Nobody comforted him, nobody came to him. That was just the way it was.

"It's dark in here." Skinner said softly. "My little brother used to be scared of the dark. He saw monsters - he said they were waiting in the wardrobe to get him, or under the bed. When our next-door neighbor died, he thought she was hiding in our room, behind the curtains. I had to check behind them every night before he'd go to sleep."

"No monsters here. Wish there were. Monsters I can handle." Mulder muttered, trying not to sniff.

"No but it sure as hell is dark." Skinner gazed around the cell at the unchanging gloom. "We're all scared of the dark. It's instinct, something primeval."

"I like the dark. It hides things." Mulder felt himself quivering again. He wished Skinner would ignore him or be curt with him or something. He could cope with that, but not with this kind concern, not with the gentle hand on his shoulder. "Shouldn't be nice to me," he mumbled. "This is my fault."

"How?" Skinner sounded genuinely surprised.

"Because everything I touch, everyone I like or care about, hell, everyone I know..they all end up getting hurt or disappearing. First Samantha, then Scully. Being abducted, going through that cancer..then dad. Even Mom."

"Your mother had a stroke. That wasn't your fault."

"Smoking man was there, before she had the stroke. I'm sure he had something to do with it. Dad was shot..because of me. Scully's sister, Melissa.. because of me. You were shot too..and now this. I should come with a government health warning."

"You didn't make those things happen. You never took a gun to anybody's head."

"I might as well have done. I can't keep standing by watching all the time. Watching as one more person is destroyed for my quests, my search for the truth. They'll come back. When they come back, I want them to kill me but they won't. Instead they'll probably kill you, just to make me suffer more."

"No. They won't kill either of us." Skinner told him softly.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because they're hooded."

"What?" Mulder sat up and looked at the other man in the darkness, feeling a tear run down his face and brushing it away angrily.

"Well what reason is there for the hoods?" Skinner asked him. "I've been thinking about it. There's only one reason why they'd wear them and that's because they have to let us go, eventually. They can't kill us. I don't know why. But when they do let us go, it's important that we don't know who they are. Hell, we might even pass them in the corridor next month at the Hoover building and not even know them."

"You think these people are FBI?" Mulder was aghast.

"I have no idea." Skinner shook his head. "But I do know they're going to great lengths not to be identifiable which suggests that they know they have to let us go. In addition, despite the damage they've caused, they've been careful not to actually do anything life threatening to us. When I first came in here I was worried that you might have internal injuries, but despite a lot of bruises, neither of us have. That's why they used that cord on us rather than just carrying on with the punching - they don't want to rupture anything, they just want to hurt us and scare us into giving them the information they want."

"I don't know whether to be comforted by that or not." Mulder lay back, biting his lips, still on the brink. "Not, I think. How much longer will this go on, with not even death to look forward to? I can't sit through it again, I can't watch again," he said, meeting Skinner's eyes.

"If you have to you will." Skinner told him seriously. "Considering the alternative."

"And if they swap around? If you have to watch next time?"

"I'll do what you want me to. I won't tell them."

"You have no idea..you don't know what it's like. It's worse watching. It is, believe me." He knew he was crying again but he couldn't stop himself this time. Skinner's hand remained on his shoulder, stroking him softly as he wept, huge racking sobs sweeping through his body. 24 years too late, he thought. Isn't that always the way? Finally someone comforts him 24 years too damn late. Not 12 any more, wanting his father to care, but a grown man. A grown

man sobbing his heart out like a child, safe in that unwanted, needed caress, his distress noticed at last, acknowledged. He felt like he cried for years and he cried for everything, for every damn thing that had gone wrong in his life, for every hurt, every pain, every loss he had endured. He couldn't hold it back, he abandoned himself to it, his pride gone along with everything else. What did it matter that Skinner saw him like this? What did anything matter any more? At last he was too exhausted to cry any more and just lay there, feeling the wetness of the tears on his shirt.

"You were asking about worst nightmares.." he murmured into the silence. Skinner was gazing at the wall, seemingly lost in thought, his hand still absently on Mulder's shoulder, still soothing gently.

"Yes?" Skinner turned back to face him as if by some great effort of will.

"That was it. Losing it like that. Here. With you. With you of all people. And knowing that we're probably going to get out of here alive, to live to fight another day. To square up to each other in your office."

"We're all scared of our own vulnerability. Sharon used to say.."

"What?" Mulder prompted.

"I guess women like you to be vulnerable. She wanted me to stop taking charge and start having emotional discussions about stuff. I wouldn't do that, not even to save our marriage. It's easier to hide behind things... you're more open than I am, Mulder. Women must love you."

"Yeah. I have to fight them off!"

"Sharon didn't understand. I like taking care of things. I don't like being taken care of... You're right - it would be better if we died. I talk too much." He got up and walked slowly, stiffly back to his bunk, cursing himself for sharing that information with Mulder. Damn, he wouldn't talk to Sharon after years of marriage, but beat him up, stick him in a cell with a sobbing subordinate and he'd open up and start singing like a bird. It made him feel ill. He went over to the toilet and retched up into it, enjoying the pain in his abdomen, relishing the physical discomfort as a way of distracting himself from his own emotions. Guys don't talk, Walter. They don't blab on about feelings and all that crap, he berated himself. Okay, so Mulder did, but Mulder's under a lot of strain and anyway he's a borderline nutcase. Almost certifiable. People like that behaved differently, but not you, Walter. You're a regular guy, you love your mom, you screwed up your marriage, you're devoted to your job and you don't ever, EVER talk about how you feel. In fact you try not to feel anything at all. That's easier - much, much easier.

"You okay?" Mulder was staring at him as he retched, bringing up nothing.

"I'm fine," he growled, getting up and returning to his bunk, turning his back to Mulder and closing his eyes.

An angry rustle of keys in the door. Two men and Mulder on his feet before Skinner was even fully awake.

"Have fun, boys?" Mulder taunted. "Nice trip?" Oh, god. Shut up, Mulder, Skinner thought to himself but he knew what the other man was trying to do.

"Very amusing." One of the men grabbed Mulder and fastened his hands roughly behind him. "But you'll pay for that."

"Yeah? How?" Mulder grinned, his eyes alight with challenge.

"Because this time we're going to hurt him so bad he might never get up again." The hooded man's voice was strained and vengeful. Mulder's face crumpled with fury.

"No. He didn't lie to you. I did. Hurt me."

"Shut up." The man said roughly.

Skinner felt himself dragged to his feet, the familiar handcuffs placed around his sore wrists, pushed out into the corridor, along to the next room. Mulder was sat down in a chair, his shoulders pressed down by one of the men while the other started winding that flex in his hands.

"No." Mulder said, agonised. "We don't know anything. Either of us. You are making a big mistake."

"How much do you think he can take?" One of the men asked, thudding his fist into Skinner's stomach. Skinner doubled over, groaning. "He's already pretty weak. How much, Mulder?" The flex lashed down on Skinner's unprotected back and Mulder swallowed, closed his eyes, felt the familiar slap across the cheek, opened them again. "Tell us!"

"I.." Mulder opened his mouth.

"If you tell them.." Skinner said hoarsely. "I will never protect you again, Mulder. I promise. You'll be on your own, really on your own this time. No Scully, no me, no-one on your side."

His eyes met Mulder's and they stayed locked for a long moment and then Mulder nodded.

This darkness was nice. Cool and gentle, like being in a long tunnel with no need to move. Darkness stretching out for as far as he could see. No sound, no movement, no sensation, just darkness. A whisper. Something annoying speaking to him. Perhaps a rat or a mouse. He was probably in a train tunnel. Yes. That made sense. If he moved his foot he could probably touch the rails, but he wouldn't move his foot because it was nice to just lie here in the darkness. He didn't need to worry about the trains. They wouldn't hurt him. But the rat was

annoying, scrabbling away beside his ear.

"Go away." That wasn't his voice, he was sure of that. It sounded muffled as if it were a long way away and wrapped up in something. His tongue was swollen, his lips parched. He clung to the darkness but daylight flooded in, claiming his senses and he found himself back inside his own pain with a jolt. Someone was screaming. "Shut up." He said. "Stop screaming." The noise stopped. The rat was moving around, still scrabbling and then he felt water poured over his face. He choked and gasped, hating the sensation, longing for the numbness of the tunnel, for the cool dark nothingness he had left behind.

"You've got to get up," someone said. "I can't lift you. Can you sit?"

"Leave me."

"No. I can't."

"I want to go back."

"Yeah, me too. Back in time to make this never happen but I don't have that power. Now come on."

"No. Back to the darkness.."

"It's still here. It's still dark. The floor's damp. And dirty. Please! You want to make me cry again is that it? What is this effect you have on grown men, sir?"

"Who..?"

"Up." He felt himself being pulled and then the pain came and smashed a pathway straight through his central nervous system and he passed out again.

He was on a bunk. Mulder was ripping up some more of his coat, soaking it in water, bringing it over. He gasped as the cool wetness was laid against his body.

"I don't know if this is doing any good but it helped me." Mulder said. "You are too heavy. I think I've done my back in. You want more water?"

"Water? Yes." Mulder disappeared and reappeared with a shoeful of water.

"Sorry about the cup.." Mulder shrugged and grinned, holding the shoe against his mouth and pouring the contents in. It felt good on his swollen tongue. "Now, hold on. This might hurt." Mulder's fingers were insistent, wiping the cuts on his body, washing them with the cool water. "Lean forward." Mulder said and he did as he was told, every atom in his body screaming with rage at his helplessness. A wave of dizziness passed through him and he clung onto Mulder's shoulder until it passed. Finally Mulder's fingers finished their endless, painful probing and he wrapped long pieces of the coat around Skinner's torso, tying them off at the side.

"I was wrong before." Skinner muttered.

"What about?"

"Worst nightmare...this is it. Being taken care of..."

"Tough." Mulder grinned. "I get to cry, you get to be bandaged. It's a fair trade-off. If we ever get out of here we can pretend it never happened. We're even's."

"Even's. Yeah." Skinner felt himself being gently lowered back down onto the bunk. He gazed around at the darkness of the cell. This surreal world that had been their home for god knew how many long hours and days. Would they ever truly be able to forget it? Or could they just dismiss it as a nightmare, full of shadows and monsters and ghosts? A place that wasn't real, a nightmare that never really happened?

Daylight. Harsh to the eye after so much darkness. Where was he now? He lay there for a long while, wondering what had changed and then realised that he did not hurt so much. He was warm, clothed. He looked around the room and saw someone sitting beside his bed, flicking through a magazine.

"You're awake then?"

"Mulder?"

"Yeah. I was bored in my room. Thought I'd come and check up on you. How are you?"

"Fine. What...I'm confused, Mulder. I went to sleep in a cell and I've woken up in a hospital. Explain it to me."

At some point during that night, as Mulder kept watch over him, he had lapsed into unconsciousness again and his condition had deteriorated. Mulder had pounded on the door in a panicked frenzy, demanding release and one of the men had finally responded, taking a look at Skinner and getting visibly agitated. A couple of hours later they were found and rescued, the paramedics taking them both straight to hospital. It was their captors who had alerted the authorities to the whereabouts of the two men, confirming Skinner's suspicion that it was not intended that they die. In fact, Mulder suspected that it was the seriousness of Skinner's condition combined with their lack of progress, that had prompted them to give up. The men who had abducted and tortured them had disappeared without trace. Skinner was sanguine about this, Mulder less so. The younger man railed on about it, pacing around Skinner's hospital room, the bruises on his face yellowing and his injured eye now fully open and back to normal. Skinner lay back and watched him rant.

"You didn't expect to catch them did you?" He asked when Mulder paused for breath.

"Yes. I want them. I want to make them suffer for what they did. For making us endure that."

"It's over, Mulder. You won't find them. Forget it." Skinner sighed.

"I can't!"

"You won't find the truth. There is no truth." Skinner shrugged.

"But I can't stop looking."

"It'll tear you apart. It always does. Haven't you had enough?"

"I will find them. I'm sure I will." Mulder told him insistently.

"Optimism?" He queried with a raised eyebrow.

"Blind hope." Mulder parried.

"Anyway, I thought we had a deal." Skinner said.

"A deal..?"

"Yes. Forget it, Mulder. Let's both forget it. Like we said we would." Mulder stopped pacing and went quite still. He stared at Skinner and Skinner stared back. Mulder left the room without saying another word.

"What are you doing here? We got a call from the hospital. They were annoyed you'd discharged yourself. So was I! That's usually my trick!" Mulder bent his long frame as he came down the stairs. "I thought you might end up here."

"I was curious." Skinner said, glancing around the damp cell. The light filtered down the stairway and into the room, revealing peeling blue paint.

"Blue. Never would have guessed." Mulder said.

"No." Skinner bent down and touched a pile of congealed blood on the floor. "Looks like we were here then," he murmured. He had made a full recovery and so had Mulder although his own injuries had been worse than Mulder's. He still felt stiff and he had some unusual scars that he had been told would take a few months to go away.

"It doesn't look so bad does it?" Mulder glanced around. It looked almost normal. Just a room.

"Daylight does that. Chases away the monsters." Skinner shrugged.

"I didn't mind the dark. In the dark you're anonymous. You can hide in the dark." Mulder said.

"Yes. In the dark there's no pain." Skinner remembered the tunnel. "I just wanted to see, that's all." He turned abruptly on his heel and left. Mulder followed on behind him. Skinner shut the door firmly behind them, locking it with the key he had requested earlier that day.

"Worst nightmares," he said. "All locked up again." He put the key in his pocket and they left without looking back.

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