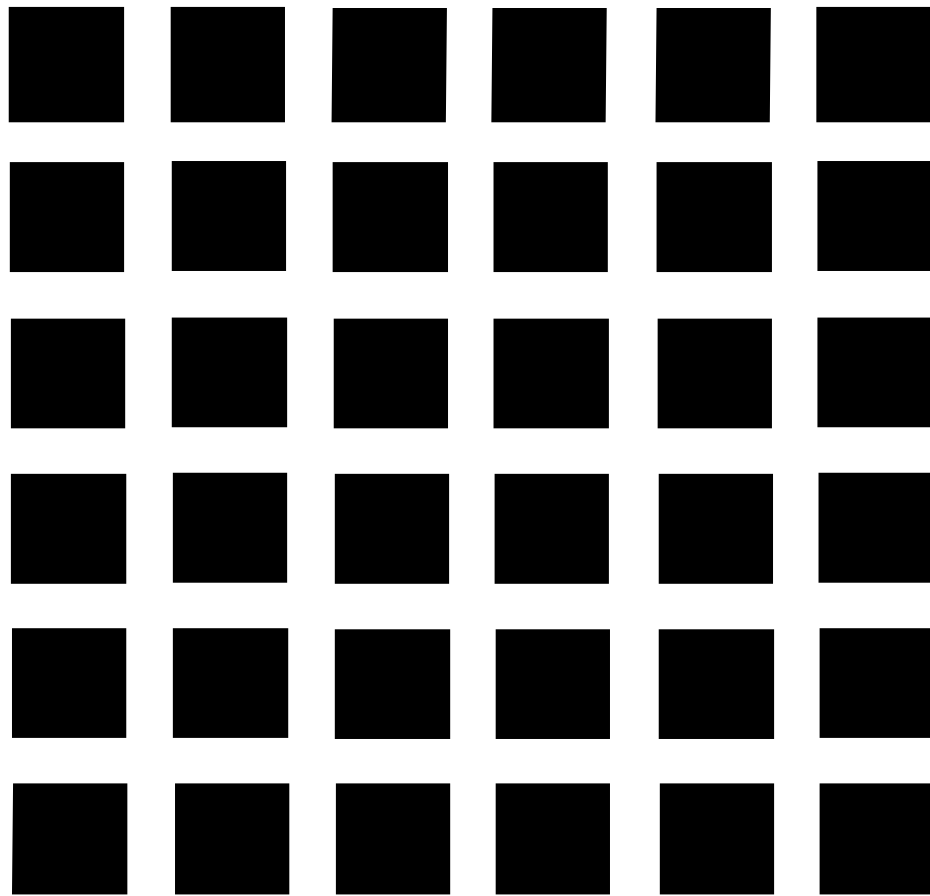


HEADS & TAILS



M. Fae Glasgow

**Bene Dictum IV
An X-Files Slash Zine**

Bene Dictum IV: Heads & Tails

an anthology of X-Files slash fiction

71,500 words

editing and design by Caroline K. Carbis

Bene Dictum IV: Heads & Tails

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▣▣▣ *Heads & Tails* is M. Fae Glasgow's first collection of *X-Files* slash. Prospective readers need to know that Skinner/Mulder stories comprise it almost exclusively. There are, however, two pieces bringing Krycek into the picture: "Trinity" and "Torrid." As usual, M. Fae writes her own particular view of the Sk/M relationship and her stories range from romantic to hopeless; from no sex shown at all to sex of the loveliest domination/submission scenarios; from slightest pretext for a piece to fully-developed, psychologically intriguing premises.

Heads & Tails marks the beginning of a new era for Oblique. When we began in 1988, zines were making the transition from production on basic word processors to true desktop publishing. So, for the last decade, we've had an exciting time collecting various writers' wonderful slash stories and presenting them in graphically creative ways. Our earliest zines were a bit primitive, others rather baroque. Still, it remains a thrill when that first copy of a new zine has been bound and can be held and admired and absorbed.

But things are changing quickly. We at Oblique have been online now for about seven years, but we have almost never posted stories to lists or put them up in HTML format on anyone's website. We are resisters. Controlling look and protecting content are serious issues with us. We've finally decided to make the transition to the web through PDF format. Eventually much (maybe all) of our catalogue of zines will be available for free download—in PDF rather than HTML format. This may annoy some we realize; for us it's the best way to continue to do what we love and to feel reasonably confident that others will see and read our work as we envisioned it.

Our website will also make available stories that were printed elsewhere or which come from authors who also wish to have their work available in something more than straight HTML. When our website is finally open for business—and it's not, as of February 1999—*Heads & Tails* will be the first zine to appear. I should also note, that when *Heads & Tails* does become available for download, it will be in a slightly corrected form. As you read through this issue, take a look at the footers. They're inconsistent. Somewhere in the middle of the project, the zine changed from being a new *Pæan to Priapus* to being a new *Bene Dictum*. Some of the footers stayed under the old title. Oh, well, at least we've spotted this typo *before* the zine was delivered to our readers. Usually the first mistake becomes visible as we are showing off a new zine to a reader. I, of course, take all responsibility for this and other typos. And as the *X-Files* has a North American setting, I have tried to edit out all of the thoroughly Scottish/British words and phrases that M. Fae tried to make Mulder say. I do not, though, have anything to do with M. Fae's commas. She keeps sneaking them in as fast as I can delete them. Enjoy!

—Caroline K. Carbis, Editor ▣▣▣

Footers have been corrected. Feb. 2000

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
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The Fox Who Cried Wolf



No redeeming qualities whatsoever; no attempt made to tell a story, just a very short slice of one extreme possibility for Skinner and Mulder's life; the result of thinking just what a brat Mulder would be if bottoms really were *always* and invariably the ones actually in charge!

Mulder is lying, spread tighter than the sheets, across Skinner's bed. His cock is erect, nearly purple, his balls swollen, the glint of cockring and the leather patina of his English cage glinting with every movement of his body. And move he does: with every stinging blow of the crop, Mulder arches, and writhes, and pulls away, only to whimper, and beg: "More! Please, sir, again!"



Skinner trails the crop along Mulder's cock, sliding it between the straps of the cage and the hypersensitivity of Mulder's cock, the crop so cool against Mulder's skin. "No," he says, using the flat tab on the handle to flick at Mulder's nipples, so red and bruised from being tied like that. "You're enjoying yourself entirely too much. And you know what they say, Fox—" he steps away from the bed, Mulder craning his neck to watch as Skinner puts the crop back in the old Marine locker, "a change is as good as a rest."

Mulder groans, not in pleasure, not in pain, as Skinner comes back, candles in his hands.

"Sorry?" Skinner says, quite pleasantly, although his hand is harsh as it whacks down on Mulder's cock, resulting in an exquisitely agonized scream. "Did you just say 'no'?"

Mulder is too busy gasping for air to answer.

"I know this bores you, Fox," Skinner says, lighting the candles, turning them carefully to maximize the melting of the wax, "but *I* like it. You've had your whipping, you've had your fucking, you've had your dildo, you've had your fisting. This—" the first sighing hiss as the hot wax pours onto underarm hair, "is for me."

Mulder simply lies there, glaring at Skinner, as the wax pours onto him, the pain not enough, the ritual leaving him cold.



Skinner raises his hand, and pours wax onto Mulder's cock.

"Scully!" yells Mulder.

Skinner's hands have Mulder uncuffed and his pulse checked before conscious thought actually engages. Emergency reactions, honed by a lifetime in the military, in the FBI, as a Master, appropriate action taking precedence over everything else.

Until Skinner realizes.

Until Skinner looks into Mulder's eyes.

Until Skinner knows.

And Mulder's cocky, mocking grin abruptly dies.

"How long is it going to take to get through your thick fucking skull, Fox William Mulder?" Skinner demands, yanking Mulder's wrists back up, cuffing him tightly to the wooden posts. "You still think you're in fucking charge, do you, boy? Still think you're the one calling the shots?" Skinner snarls, digging his fingernails into Mulder's balls. "Don't like that, huh?" Skinner leans down very, very, close. "So stop me, boy," he whispers.

"Get your fucking hands off me!"

Skinner smiles. "Make me," he says, kindly.

"Let me go!" Mulder screams, struggling, trying to kick legs that are tightly bound, widespread and useless.

"Like I said," Skinner repeats, kissing Mulder gently on the cheek, "make me."

"You fucking bastard! Let me go!"

Soft whisper: "No."

"Scully!" Mulder yells. "It's the fucking safeword! Scully! Scully!"

"I'm sorry, Agent Mulder," Skinner says in that bland, reasonable tone usually reserved for requests for certain people to not smoke in his office, "but Agent Scully isn't available right now. She's—" a very sweet, very threatening smile, "tied up."

"But I said the safeword! You have to let me go, you have to stop!"

And a third time: "Make me."

Real panic beginning to show in Mulder's eyes now, his voice dropping down, low, and calm, but a tremor there, betraying him. "Now, sir, you know we have an agreement. When I use the safeword, we stop. You let me go."

"True," Skinner says, settling quite comfortably on the bed beside Mulder, running a lazy fingertip over the swollen, bound tips of Mulder's nipples. "But there's a problem with that contract, boy."

"Sir," Mulder says, his tone amazingly placating,

as if he were speaking to a heavily armed man under the control of a pusher, "we do have a contract, and I'm glad you remember that. If there's a problem, we can discuss this, get it fixed. If you let me go, we can go into the other room, have a drink, discuss this as equals—"

"No," Skinner replies, kindly, again. "We can't."

"We can, you just have to—"

"That's just it, boy. I don't 'have to' *anything*. The problem with the contract, boy, is that *you* broke it."

"Sir, I don't want to argue with you—"

Skinner talks right over him, ignoring him. "The safeword is real, boy. It's for emergencies, when things are too much, physically, emotionally, whatever. It's not—" a swift, unexpected bite to Mulder's left nipple, the howl of pain taking a moment to die down, Mulder's cock still hard, "to be used just because you don't get off on what I'm doing. It's not to be used—" and this time the sharp teeth close—nearly dangerously—on Mulder's cockhead, Mulder's sobs taking a long time to fade enough for him to listen, Mulder's cock oozing precum, "because you think you're the one calling the shots and the game isn't being played according to *your* rules.

"I'm the top, Fox," Skinner says, in such a mild tone of voice, no chest-beating, no yelling, just the quiet certainty of a powerful, dominant man, "and I don't care what the *fads* and the *fashion* and the fucking PC Police say, I'm the one who's in charge.

He begins unbuckling the English cage, the returning blood flow going through Mulder like pins and needles, agonizing burning in Mulder's cock, Skinner putting a strong hand in the center of Mulder's chest, holding him steady. "I'm the one who sets everything up. I'm the one who makes the decisions, takes the responsibility. I'm the one," Mulder's balls set free, dropping suddenly, so painfully, "who sets the limits.

"Now," a gentle kiss to Mulder's leaking cock, Mulder whimpering at even that stimulation, "I respect your limits—when they're real. But to use your safeword just because something *bore*s you—that's stupid, Fox. And it's dangerous. It's really—" Skinner pushes four fingers into Mulder's ass, echoing the fisting of earlier, and the risks that it carries, "dangerous.

"And it's time," a pause while he slowly unwinds the string from around Mulder's left nipple and waits for Mulder's groans to die down, "to stop letting you fuck around and play games. It's





time,” the right nipple, Mulder’s balls drawing up, near orgasm, as the pain shrieks through him, Skinner looking at him and knowing it will only take one more touch to push Mulder over the edge into bliss, “to teach you a real lesson, boy.”

Skinner gets up from the bed. Gets a tie—a tie? the question leaps into Mulder’s eyes—and a jockstrap, and then knowledge dawns in Mulder’s gaze. “No,” Mulder says, meaning it. Louder, and louder, until he’s screaming, his voice reverberating around the thickly insulated walls of this special room.

Sudden silence. No, not silence: it simply seems so quiet after Mulder’s screams. Muffled yells, the sound of handcuffs clanking during a struggle, wet sounds being stifled, the creak of bedsprings.

A quiet, controlled voice, devoid of anger, containing only power, and control: “You remember your safe signal, boy?” Skinner asks, watching carefully, double-checking the gag.

Mulder glares at him.

“I asked you a question,” Skinner tells him, not touching him, not hurting him, leaving Mulder to

lie there, achingly hard and frustrated on every level there is. “Do you remember your safe signal, boy?”

Mulder nods.

“Then show me.”

Another glare, until Skinner raises an eyebrow, and Mulder makes a specific motion with his left hand, and repeats it, at Skinner’s pointed gaze, with his foot.

“Good,” Skinner says, gently—oh, terribly gently, gentle enough to punish—stroking Mulder’s belly. “Now, I want you to remember one other thing, boy.” He leans down again, until Mulder can see nothing but Skinner’s face, Skinner’s eyes. “Remember the boy who cried wolf—Fox.”

And with that, Skinner goes into the other room, lounging on the couch where he can watch television—the sound of football roaring through—and still keep an eye on Mulder through the open door.

Leaving Mulder to lie there, truly, absolutely, finally helpless. Submissive. Obedient. And for the first time, knowing it.



Movie Magic

I was about to lose my net access (well, email: I'm a bit of a luddite and really *prefer* a shell account!) which meant leaving lists and friends behind. I did this as a sort of quickie 'thank-you and good-bye' to one list and also in a bit of reaction to the unceasing whining about "Mulder ditched Scully *again*." This is based on the trailer for Pine Bluff Variant, but set during All Souls.



God, but he hated this. Considering he needed to get a life, he was having a hell of a time fitting this extra 'life' of his into his schedule. And Scully was going to kill him when she found out what he'd been doing without telling her. Without her back-up. Without any back-up, most of the time. Death by blunt scalpel and castration, that's what she'd be writing on his death certificate when she found out.

Maybe he could hide behind Skinner when he told her.

Maybe he could argue that it had been his duty. Obligation. Job?

None of which explain not telling me, Mulder, she'd say, he just knew it. Knew the tone of voice she'd use too, and knew just how tall he'd feel, lying down there in the gutter along with the rest of the refuse, looking up at her tiny little feet.

At least tomorrow he could get that info she'd phoned him for, maybe even help her out if she'd let him, since she wasn't going to be letting him near her for a month when she found out what he'd been doing behind her back.

She really was going to kill him. Slowly.

He crossed the road at a dead run, then felt like a fool, averting his eyes from the posters—posters that were tame compared to some of his video boxes and catalogues. But dammit, porn was a solitary vice designed for solitary pleasures; this whole thing, this standing so discreetly discrete amongst a milling crowd waiting to be thrilled at the same time, sitting in the dark, together? This was altogether a kettle of a different color. It was one thing, sitting on his couch at home, on the phone to one of his favorite services, or watching a video. But standing here, close enough to smell the excess cologne on one man, close enough to feel awkward at the enthusiasm of



another man? Here, instead of the cozy comfort of self...knowledge, it was no one looking at anyone else, everyone pretending they were completely alone, but underneath it all, the furtive looks, the awareness, the excitement of exhibitionists, of those out hunting, and of those just begging to be caught.

But at least this was a place where no one would look twice if two men sat close together, handed things back and forth, whispered to each other. Compared to what else would be going on, who'd waste their time on a display as boring as that?

He turned the corner, almost stumbling on the first step up, steadying himself face to...face...with a full-color, full-size poster for next week's *Back Door Bonanza!* Tailing someone, he'd told Scully, looking at the ripe, naked, perfectly airbrushed ass three inches from his face. Oh, God, Scully really was going to kill him.

The smell was peculiar, an absence of popcorn and a melange of the familiar with things he'd prefer not to identify; the traditional movie-theater sticky floor took on a whole new meaning here. Darkness reaching up to the distant ceiling, the widening wedge of projection light, the black arches of seats, and the pale glimmers of faces and moving hands. And looming over it all, the biggest pair of bouncing breasts he'd ever seen—and not just because they covered an entire movie screen. Someone bumping into him from behind, with enough lingering enthusiasm to make him hasten to reach his designated seat. He sat down, pulled his jacket in close, and tried not to look around. Oh, that would look good on his report: contact wasn't made because the agent had been too busy explaining that, honest, he'd just been curious, not sending out engraved invitations.

Resolutely, he looked up at the screen.

And for the first time ever, felt woefully inadequate.

It's just the screen size, he told himself. And anyway, size didn't count.

Or at least that's what they said.

Still, it made him wonder anew what the appeal of this place was, when a man could watch this in the comfort—and relative cleanliness—of his own home.

Movement beside him: his contact, he thought, heaving a sigh of relief that blended with the moans and wet sounds coming—he hoped—from the speakers, and not from that creep edging up into the seat behind him.

A flutter of white, his mind taking a fraction of a second to make the jump from what he'd expected to see to what he was actually seeing. Another fraction of a second while he tried to think what the hell the etiquette was in this situation—he couldn't really just move away, he was here with specific instructions.

The man sitting beside him wasn't a creep, at least to look at, and the weirdo had moved away from behind him. There was another flicker of motion, impatient.

Of course, he could always take what was being offered.

Had to, he could claim, otherwise I would have blown—watch the Office of Professional Responsibility try not to react to that—my cover. Sir.

Skinner would kill him. Right after Scully. But only after they'd both given him a lecture on AIDS and every other STD in the books.

He let his shoulders slump with his relief. It seemed that staying zipped up and face averted counted as a big fat 'no' in this place. He twisted his wrist, trying to see the time in the flickering brightness of a shining cock sliding into an unfocused pinkness. His contact wasn't late, not yet. Ten more minutes—he'd wait ten more minutes.

Watched as bright red lips sank down an incredible length of cock, blue eyes glinting up through tousled bottle-blond hair, as another man came up behind her.

So maybe he'd make allowances for traffic, a flat tire, give his contact more than ten minutes.

Looked at that screen, felt the susurating excitement of sexual tension, of sexual contact, filling the theater.

Crossed his legs; spread them again.

Sneaked a low-lashed look around at the men dotted furtively like bushes in a public park. Right shoulders moving, facial expressions, the occasional loud explosive sigh, the twist of guilt from refugee parsons. Looked at the other men, fewer of these, walking slowly up and down the aisles, or between the rows of seats. Looked finally at the other men, fewer still, sitting side by side, or very blatantly doing more than just sitting.

Scully would kill him, if she found out. Skinner would annihilate him, if he found out.

If they found out.

If they found out.

Because he sure as hell wasn't going to tell them. It wasn't even that risky: if he were seen, he





could put it in his report, claim it was to protect his cover, request some counseling to get over the trauma of having unwanted sexual contact with another man. Or if he hadn't realized he'd been seen, he could claim to have been too embarrassed and troubled by the whole experience to want to put it into his report, and then request counseling to put it all—ahem—behind him. It'd be easy: talking rings around overworked government-issue shrinks—he'd done it often enough already.

And even in the unlikely event that he was caught, there was no reason to tell them, any of them, what he saw when he closed his eyes and some stranger sucked him off. No reason to tell them just which face he'd imagined surrounding the mouth going down on him. No reason to confess that to anyone at all.

So all the bases were covered.

He looked around, again.

Impatience was gnawing on him, the sights and sounds on the screen and in the flickering shadows getting to him, making him hard enough to ache. There were five more minutes left in the time window for his contact; after that, he was going to concede defeat and yield to temptation.

Someone sitting down beside him; his own glance measuring, before professionalism kicked in and he looked at this man as something beyond a convenient body.

A plain white envelope and a legal-size brown one, folded, rounded writing a tantalizing pattern.

And then the seat beside him was empty again.

Carefully, Mulder tucked the envelopes into the inner pocket of his jacket, wondered how many men here assumed he was simply a collector of the unmentionable vice.

Not quite enough to make him jump up, wave his badge and tell them it wasn't *that* kind of photograph he'd been given. But definitely enough to make him spurn the first couple of sleazeballs who approached him after.

There were new bodies on the screen in the same old positions, and there was definitely something to be said for sitting there staring up at miles of naked, glistening flesh, hearing those sounds, amplified, by Surround Sound speakers, and then echoed by the men sitting around him.

He had his excuses and rationalizations neatly lined up and ready to go, he'd done the official part of what he'd come here for: his conscience was clear.

So he leaned back in his seat, spread his legs, undid his zipper. Saw several heads turn in his direction; three men, no, four, slowly approaching him.

He reached into the warm layers of cloth, his fingers closing around the greater warmth of his cock.

And his phone rang.

The approaching men scattered like cats in the rain, and Mulder's erection wilted. Scully. It had to be Scully.

Trying to whisper, trying to pull his zipper up without her hearing (*Tailing a suspect with your zipper down, Mulder?* she'd ask, that eyebrow on the rise.) "Yeah?"

"Agent Mulder."

He nearly dropped the phone. Sitting exposed in a public movie theater, a public porn movie theater—shades of Peewee Herman—was not the time to have your boss call you.

"Sir?" he whispered, a couple of people turning to look at him with renewed interest.

"Did you make contact?"

I would have, if you hadn't interrupted me, Mulder thought, fingers straying to the soft cotton of his pants. "Yes, sir. I received two items."

"Good. I want to see them immediately—"

"No," he said, before his brain could shut his mouth. Shit shit shit, he said to himself, brain keeping his mouth firmly shut now that it was too damned late.

"No? Why the hell not?"

Good question. "My cover."

There was a pause, which never—ever—bode well.

"Mulder, where the hell are you? What the hell is going on?"

A glance at the screen, a woman swallowing a man all the way down, her fingers playing with his balls, stroking his ass. "I'm where my contact arranged to meet me, sir."

There was another pause before Skinner continued: "Your cover."

On the screen, she was lowering a condom onto the huge cock, covering him. "Yes, sir."

"And why would leaving blow your cover?"

He nearly choked on the synchronicity of Skinner's words and the woman on the screen taking a second man's cock into her mouth. "Uh...this isn't the kind of place you leave right away. They don't exactly like the patrons talking on their phones, either."





He could hear Skinner's fingers tapping on the other phone, and the muted sound of...a truck? A bus? Traffic, of some sort.

"Okay, give me your location, I'll meet you in the lobby, pick up the items there."

The devil made him do it. The devil, or stupidity, or a hell-bent taste for risk that was going to get him killed sooner rather than later, but whatever it was, it made him do it. "That's subtle and discreet, sir," he said, sarcastic enough to annoy Skinner into acting first, thinking later. "Why don't I give you the same instructions my contact gave me? Central aisle, fifth row from the back, seven seats in on the right."

Another pause, the humming, buzzing quiet between their cellphones drowned out by a moan from the screen. *Le mort* or *le petit mort*, impossible to tell by sound alone, but Mulder had the screen in front of him, luring him in with a display not of murder, but orgasm. Faked, probably, but his cock was stupid, bucking up at the sound, and the sight.

"Give me the address," Skinner said, and Mulder closed his eyes.

Suicide. Or the next phase. Skinner's choice. His voice a throaty murmur, Mulder gave the same address and directions he'd been given.

"Five minutes," Skinner told him.

Five minutes, Mulder thought, clicking his phone closed. He stroked a finger along his jeans, tracing the blunt tip of his cock through cotton; yeah, he could hold out for five more minutes.

He was surprised to see Skinner ease along the row towards him: he'd expected to feel the heat of radiated fury the second Skinner stepped into the theater and saw just what kind of movie house Mulder had brought him to.

Mulder leaned back in his seat, looked steadily at the man approaching him. Pushed down the seat next to his own.

Skinner sat, glasses reflecting the acres of skin on the screen, his mouth reflecting his mood.

But still, Skinner sat down, with his overcoat draped over his lap.

Maybe, Mulder thought. Maybe not.

The interest was there, he'd be a fool not to have noticed, and Skinner would have to be a moron not to have picked up Mulder's hints. Make or break time. Still watching, Mulder unzipped again, and slid his hand inside.

Beside him, Skinner swallowed. Looked away.

Nowhere to hide, Mulder thought, amused, kind,

watching the conflict on Skinner's face, in his body language. Nowhere at all, not this time. Skinner's glasses flashed as he looked at the screen, looked to the left, to the right. Down, finally, to the floor.

An unmistakable sound from the speakers behind them, and from the man three rows in front of them; Mulder watched, as Skinner wiped his forehead; nice to know that Skinner had a chink in his armor.

Skinner, still looking straight down at the floor. "I'll speak to you about this...location later, Mulder. Give me the items."

Mulder said nothing at all, words the tools of the rational mind and thinking rationally was the last thing he wanted either of them doing. Instead, he reached out, saw the instant his hand came within Skinner's narrowed field of vision, and slid his hand into the folds of Skinner's coat, leaving the envelopes there. Saw Skinner's tension ease, let off the hook—and then all of Skinner's tension back again, tenfold, Mulder's hand pushing its way under Skinner's coat. Fumbling, through wool, tangling in silk lining, then finding it: a different texture of wool, smoother, thinner than the coat, and warm, dry, softness over firmness.

A hiss of breath, a flutter of a glance in his direction, a decision nearly made, witnessed by the angry twist of Skinner's mouth.

And then Mulder had him, literally in the palm of his hand. He pressed down, and Skinner's breath hissed inwards again, and Skinner's cock pulsed upwards. Softness, over hardness. Not a chink in Skinner's armor, but no armor at all, control a mere myth running away from reality as Mulder pushed in closer and rubbed his hand, hard and firm, across Skinner's trapped arousal. Mulder gazed, entranced, as desire and hunger chased the anger and rejection from Skinner's face.

Touching Skinner, at last, not needing to close his eyes to imagine that mouth stretched around his cock. This—he—was insane, and dangerous, all common sense devoured by the insidious, invidious thrill of being caught. Caught, together, linked, bonded; caught, together, people seeing, the other men in this place, knowing, understanding, wishing it were them.

To be seen, and known. No secrets. The truth is out there.

He wanted, fiercely, to kiss Skinner, but that was too much, for where he was, maybe for who Skinner was.





But there were other things he could do with his mouth that could be neatly filed away under ‘sex maniac.’ Leaning forward, his body hidden by the row of seats in front and behind, his head hidden under the weight of Skinner’s damp coat, and his mouth meeting his hand, following the length veiled by wool and cotton, mouth and hand working together, bringing Skinner out, hand holding tightly, mouth opening wetly, perfect harmony, and Skinner letting him do this. Skinner wanting this.

Wanting him.

No. That was too dangerous, hope and reality both.

So think only about the cock in his mouth, the taste and the textures, the contrasts, the intricacies of vein and skin and flange and slit. The reactions thrumming through the thighs under him, and pressing the strong hands down on top of him. Reactions breeding action, his own cock touched—oh God, perfect sure strong grip, holding him, stroking him, stripping pleasure up and down the length of him, hard pleasure, hot, burning him up—chill air on him, his own groan of disappointment muffled by the cock thrusting suddenly up into his mouth. He sucked, hard, from tip to base to tip again, holding only the head in his mouth, tongue stroking and darting and doing every good thing he’d ever had done to himself.

And then: the hand that gripped him was wet now, sliding smooth and easy along him, thumb rubbing over the sweet tip of him, spreading the slickness there. Pressure against his face, as Skinner leaned forward, two hands on Mulder now, one pulling his balls free of indigo jeans, the other still stroking, stroking and stroking and stroking—

He couldn’t concentrate on anything but the touch on him, the gathering pleasure in his balls, the sensation tingling all through him, from the stroke of thumb across the head of his cock to the thick ache at the root of him, inside, making him feel huge, big as the guys on the screen, bigger, nothing but cock, just cock and pleasure and Skinner and—

He muffled his noise against Skinner’s shirt, lay there while the last of it pulsed out of him, lay there as Skinner cradled him, not stroking, fingers barely nuzzling against him. Coming down, slowly, calming enough to obey the press of hand against his nape, mouth sucking Skinner inside again. Harder than before, bigger, hotter, the veins knotting with need against his tongue.

Skinner’s hips pushing up into him, Skinner’s hand pushing down onto him, a strangled, hoarse sound from overhead, and then he was swallowing, his mouth filling, swallowing Skinner again, again, again, until there was only the lingering taste and texture, and the quiescent cock softening. Being withdrawn. The hand on the back of his neck pulling hard at the collar of his jacket.

Well, at least he’d die with a smile on his face.

He sat up very straight, and it took him a moment to face Skinner—to face reality. He’d done it; he’d actually done it—and he’d really done it now: sex, with Skinner, in public.

Oh God, Scully was *really* going to kill him. And very, very, very slowly.

Skinner was staring at the screen, but Mulder was willing to bet the X-Files that Skinner wasn’t registering what his eyes were seeing. That muscle was jumping in Skinner’s jaw, the lips clenched tightly shut.

Another one of those times when Mulder cursed his inability to keep his own mouth shut—in more ways than one, given what he’d just done. “I guess it’s too late to ask if you want to—”

“Wipe your mouth.”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Mulder pulled the hem of his T-shirt up, wiped his mouth and chin, his cheek. Sat there for a moment. “So are you going to kill me, suspend me, fire me or just make my life hell? Or are we going to Cancun on our honeymoon?”

“Do you realize—” Words bitten off like the tip of a cigar, the rest spat out. “In public, Mulder? Jesus fucking Christ on a crutch—”

“Hey, that wasn’t *my* cock I was sucking, that wasn’t *my* hand—”

“Which proves just how insane this is.”

“Insane? Okay, so it was impetuous and maybe I should have been more discreet—”

“Maybe? *Maybe?*”

“Walter—”

Cold. Too damned cold. “What did you just call me?”

Leaning in close, close enough that Skinner could well smell himself on Mulder’s breath. “I sucked your cock. Don’t expect me—”

“Don’t expect *anything*, Mulder. This—” small, tight hand gesture, the theater, the screen, Mulder, all of it dismissed, Skinner jolting to his feet, “didn’t happen. I came in here, you gave me the documents, and I left you to your own devices. Your own vices.”



Grabbing at Skinner, catching the sleeve of his jacket, holding on hard and fast, no way for Skinner to escape without drawing even more attention. Low voiced, spitting the words at Skinner. "You wanted this as much as I did."

And Skinner leaning down, low, near enough to kiss, and his voice was terribly, cruelly, gentle. "Which is why this never happened."

Mulder let go, watched as Skinner threaded his way through the seats.

Leaned back, staring blankly at the screen, uncaring, unnoticed, giving not a damn who was doing what to whom up there, or in these seats.

Way to go, he told himself. Way to prove we can keep this under control and under wraps. Oh yeah, you did just great.

And Scully was still going to kill him.



Paper Hearts

No prizes for guessing when this is set. The state Mulder was in at the end of that episode just begged for him not to be left alone—and Scully’s unconscionable breezing off and leaving him alone bugged the hell out of me. There are also no prizes for guessing which type of story this is, either!



The end of the day; fabric hearts locked away in drawers, and other hearts no longer worn on sleeves. The television wasn’t on yet, the mail was dumped, unread, on the kitchen counter, a single glass on its side in the sink, still wet. Soft, unshod footsteps, a man putzing around, restless, unsettled, unfocused, as daylight bleeds into darkness. A knock at the door, no element of surprise, just Mulder’s shoulders untensing already, his eyes lightening, and his footsteps hurrying to the door. Completely at ease, Mulder opened the door, pulled it wide, smiled and said, “Hi, come on—” smile atrophying, tension jumping back into the shoulders, “oh, it’s you, Scully.”

“You were expecting someone else?” she asked, eyebrow on the rise as she walked in.

“Uh, no. Uh, yes, maybe, depends—”

“That’s clear enough.”

“Not that I’m not glad to see you, but... What are you doing here tonight, Scully?”

She gave him a look for that: a look that encompassed everything Mulder had been through in the last few days; a look that encompassed him being so hurt and shaken tonight he’d instigated a hug with her.

“Good point,” he said, looking shamefaced. “You want coffee?”

“Sure.” A pointedly affectionate smile that cast back to the last time he’d offered to make her coffee. “But I’ll make it.”

“Hey, I only did that once!”

“Which was more than enough. I’ll make the coffee.”

Only Mulder would have a kitchen “organized” like this. She’d found everything, eventually, plus two carafes for the coffee maker, and four blends of coffee. She shrugged, picked the one she liked best and—



Heard a knock at the door. At least, that's what she thought it was.

Oh, it's you, Mulder had said. So who the hell else could ever be expected to show up at Fox Mulder's place? She picked up two bags of coffee, one in each hand, the perfect picture of polite inquiry.

Her perfectly nuanced, "Mulder, which blend do you want?" was swallowed down in favor of silence as an unexpectedly familiar figure passed by on his way to the living room.

Skinner? *Skinner* had shown up here?

She stepped closer, careful to betray herself with neither noise nor motion. Eavesdropping? Damn straight. She slipped her shoes off so she could get away with her eavesdropping undetected.

Mulder's voice was very quiet, very soft—more apologetic and upset than she'd ever heard. "I fucked up. I really fucked up."

It had been a long time since she'd last heard Skinner so cold. "Yes, you did."

The misery and regret in Mulder's voice was enough to make a stone bleed. "I'm sorry."

"I know, but that doesn't change it. You fucked up big time, Mulder, and I have no choice. I'm putting a letter of reprimand in your file."

Scully winced, and edged a little closer so she could see as well as hear, canting her head just briefly round the doorway. They were standing just inside the living room, very close together. Skinner was in his overcoat still, and Mulder was tie-less, his sleeves rolled up, his feet bare.

"An official reprimand?"

"You disobeyed direct instructions, you removed a Federal prisoner without permission," and even from here she could see the anger and stress in Skinner's face, but that didn't stop her from wanting to kill the bureaucracy-bound bastard for speaking to Mulder in this tone of voice. "You transported him across state lines, and your carelessness and errors resulted in a little girl being put at risk and suffering emotional trauma."

"I'm sorry," again, from Mulder, her partner's face lowered, his shoulders slumping miserably. "I guess I'm lucky to still have a job."

"Yes. You are."

C'mon, Skinner, she thought, ease off, look at what he was going through, you unbending, stone-hearted motherfucking son of a bitch. She started to step forward to peek at them again, but stopped, nearly squeaking in sheer shock.

Mulder was speaking again, but it was the tone

this time, not the words, that pulled the rug—metaphorically—out from under her. "I know I fucked up, I disappointed you—"

"You made a mistake, Fox."

Fox? Skinner calls Mulder *Fox*? Where the hell were the damned smelling salts when she needed them? And how come Skinner got to call him that but she—ah. Scratch that. Pay attention to what they were doing right now in front of her.

She sneaked another peek: Mulder was looking up at Skinner, which struck Scully, for the first time. He always did that, but the height difference—from her perspective especially—was virtually non-existent, and if anything, in Mulder's favor.

"I didn't mean to scare that little girl. And you were so angry at me. So disappointed in me."

Mulder? This was Mulder just... baring his soul like this, for Skinner? For the boss who'd just put an official black mark against him forever?

"That was the job, Fox," she heard. Didn't believe it. Did not believe that such tenderness, that such forgiveness, could come from Skinner. To Mulder. Over *that*.

"Was it?"

"That was only the job, Fox. You made a mistake, you fucked up. So you'll learn from it, you'll know next time to listen to me, to listen to Scully."

"You're not going to..."

She peeked at them again, nearly gave herself away: Skinner was stroking Mulder's bare forearm. She ran the image and the description through her head again: Skinner was stroking Mulder's bare forearm. She craned her neck so she could watch that some more.

"I'm not going to what? Withdraw from you? Punish you with silence? Fox, last time I checked, I wasn't your mother," and yes, he was still stroking Mulder's arm, which was losing its shocking impact, which was just as well, considering just how shocked she was by what Skinner was saying—and how he was saying it, "Look, you made a mistake, you made a terrible mistake, but give yourself a fucking break. You were raw with emotion, you were so distraught about Samantha and what it would mean she had gone through if Roche had taken her..."

"He molested them," Mulder said softly. Bitter half-laugh and Scully didn't look, not this time: she didn't need to see such pain on Mulder's face again so soon. "Molested. We wrap it up in such a tame, civilized word so we can mollify what he did to





them, so we don't have to deal with the truth. You've seen his files, can you—"

"He didn't have Samantha. He didn't do those things to her."

C'mon, Skinner, she thought, you can do better than that. Help him, for God's sake.

"No. But someone else could have. Someone else, and maybe my mind created the aliens because that was better than the truth. And out there, there's a mother and a father still wondering where their little girl is and I let Roche get himself killed before he told us—"

"We've established that you fucked up. Your record shows you fucked up. You failed, Fox—"

Oh, make it easy on him, she thought, the tenderness of that stroking hand soured by the unyielding... truthfulness of his words.

And if his tone of voice had been any different, she'd have pulled her gun and chased him, for what he said. "You failed, and you have to live with that."

"I'll deal with that," she heard Mulder, his voice raw as bare feet over lava, shifting then to a level of fear she had never heard, not for gun-wielding mutants or anything. "But I made you so angry—and I disappointed you."

"That doesn't change anything, Fox."

She had to look to see what went with *that* tone of voice.

Holy Mary Mother of God—

Skinner was kissing Mulder. Tiny little kisses, to his eyes, his cheeks, his lips. Not just sex, Skinner and Mulder weren't just fucking they were...

And he hadn't *told* her? She was going to kill him for that.

But later. Later when she'd found a way to extricate herself—and them—from what was going to be a hideously embarrassing scene if she wasn't careful. Eavesdropping was fun only up to a certain point, and then it made life just too damned awkward.

"You're not still mad at me?"

"For what? Being human? Failing, the way I have, the way everyone has?"

Scully watched, and admitted something inside her simply melted as Mulder leaned forward, his arms going under Skinner's coat—and jacket too, she'd bet—and Mulder rested his head on Skinner's shoulder. She kept right on watching as Skinner wrapped his arms around Mulder, held him tight, then stroked his back, and his hair.

Funny, wasn't it? Everyone in the Bureau thought she and Mulder were lovers. But today, she

had stroked his hair, and held him, and it had been nothing like this. This was...

This was the stuff dreams were made of. This was Hollywood, this was romance novels, this was make-believe perfection. This was what everyone wanted, but no one ever got.

Typical, that Spooky Mulder would have what no one else even really believed in anymore.

Abruptly, Mulder pulled away. "Scully—" "Scully's here?"

"Yeah, making coffee. Sorry, I didn't think, God, I'm fucking up again—"

And okay, so if someone pushed her about it, she'd admit she'd got something in her eye there, for a moment, for Skinner had reeled Mulder back in, and kissed him, just for a second, but full on the mouth. "There are far worse things than Scully finding out."

Definitely something in her eye.

She moved quickly and silently back towards the sink, slipped her shoes back on and made damn sure she clumped—but naturally, of course—on her way to the living room. "Mulder," she said, sounding just exactly the way she always did, "I finally found everything in that mess you call a kitchen. But which type of coffee—oh." Just the right degree of surprise, as she looked at them, the two of them standing a decorous and standard two feet apart. Just like usual. "Sir. I didn't know you were coming over. I'm just making coffee. Would you like some?"

And Mulder looked at Skinner, and Skinner looked at Mulder, and then they both looked at her, three highly-skilled, very intelligent people about to pretend complete obliviousness. But then Skinner looked at Mulder, and must have been able to read the hope in Mulder's eyes as clearly as Scully could; he shrugged his coat off, moved in closer to Mulder and Scully had to hide a smile at the way he squared his shoulders, bravely, before meeting her eyes and speaking to her. "I'd love a cup of coffee. He likes the raspberry hazelnut mocha decaf, but the only drinkable one is the plain French Roast."

"Then French Roast it'll be," she said, as the two men followed her into the kitchen, Mulder carping, Skinner taking over with his usual competence, and it was all exactly the way it always was. Exactly the same.

Only now she knew. And they knew she knew. This could get...interesting...she thought, and let Skinner make the coffee.



I have a friend who loves hurt/comfort. I don't. This was my attempt at an h/c that she'd like and I wouldn't loathe! And please note: Since "Dreamland" was undone, I've decided to undo Mulder's stacked-to-the-rafters bedroom therein.

Amidst the ruffling of papers and the rattle of drawers, Scully could be heard muttering under her breath. Mulder's filing system was a law unto itself, which wasn't helping, nor was the fact that as soon as the toxicology report finished coming through, Skinner would be down here, wanting the damned report: the damned report that Mulder swore blind he'd finished—in triplicate—and put away safely. Her mouth thinned, lipstick abruptly looking too harsh on her pallid face. Two days ago, Mulder had been rushing out of the office to hit Skinner with another whatever-the-hell-it-was investigation, Scully following behind asking pointed and penetrating questions about the wisdom of this and the dependability of yet another of Mulder's infamous 'sources.' She was lingeringly furious with him for that time he'd actually used the *Weekly World News* as a source—but not mentioned that minor detail to her till they were sitting in front of Skinner. When she sniped at him in unchecked reaction, he'd dropped like a stone, the sound he'd made hitting the ground not easily forgotten.



Dana Scully straightened up for a moment, took several deep breaths, her expression shifting slowly from furrowed-brow worry to cool, calm, collected, if one didn't look too closely. She opened another filing drawer, cases grouped by alleged type of alleged abduction, fingers scrabbling through the labels, hurrying to get this found and read before Skinner started demanding answers: just because one agent was out sick didn't mean the entire system ground to a halt.

No sign of the file. She glanced at her watch: no progress on that Dickinson file, and she still had to gather together the other papers and materials for her lecture at Quantico this afternoon since she'd been too busy at the hospital yesterday to do a lick



of work. And she still had to fit in going to check on Mulder.

Speak of the devil. Her mouth quirked as she found the Dickinson report between the Hardy and Elliot case papers: one down, four to go.

The door opened behind her, so she straightened, turning to be properly polite to her boss who was, after all, lowering himself quite a bit to play errand boy for Mrs. Spooky.

“What the *hell* are you doing here?”

“Hey,” Mulder said, voice as wan as his face, “I work here.”

“Not today you don’t,” she snapped, stepping forward as Mulder weaved unsteadily towards his desk. “And not tomorrow you don’t, and not the day after. Mulder, the doctors—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said, leaning heavily on the desk as he slumped down gratefully into his seat, “I know what they said about resting for three days. But come on, Scully, the doctors also said I wasn’t going to make it and look at me—” arms spreading, hands beginning to shake, Mulder quickly grabbing the edge of the desk, “good as new.”

“You sound like a used car salesman,” she said, coming round to take his pulse. “Only less convincing.”

“Okay, so I’m tired, and getting here took it out of me a bit—”

She raised one perfectly plucked brow at him.

“—quite a bit...”

Her lips formed a perfect moue.

“Okay, okay, a lot. But what else am I going to do, Scully? Stay home, wondering who tried to poison me—wondering if the water is safe to drink?”

She conceded that point with a glance, but that didn’t mean she was going to let him get away with the rest of it. “Krycek was last seen in Russia, you can always drink bottled water and while we don’t know where you got...whatever you got, there’s no proof that it happened at home. You need to be resting—”

He smiled at her, fond enough to let her know he appreciated her mother henning him. “I need to be finding out who tried to kill me—”

“This time.”

“—this time. But I can’t do that lying on my couch at home watching *Oprah*.”

She pressed her hand to the back of his neck: unscientific, but an effective substitute for a ther-

mometer. “The doctors and nurses nearly threw you out onto the street last night just to get you out of their hair, Mulder—do you really want to relapse enough that I have to take you back there?”

He pulled sharply away. “I won’t relapse—”

She leaned in really, really, really close: close enough to see the small beads of sweat and the faint tremor in his jaw. “Do the words ‘Foley catheter’ mean anything to you, Mulder?”

He looked suitably appalled. “You wouldn’t...”

“I wouldn’t.”

“C’mon, Scully, I’m feeling a lot better,” he wheedled, “I won’t relapse—”

No polite knock, the door being swung open. Skinner, one hand on the door knob, the other holding a sheaf of papers, a frown on his face as he read. “Scully, the toxicology came back with— What the hell are *you* doing here?”

Mulder winced; apparently thought better of repeating his facetious answer. “I’m fine, sir. I thought I could rest just as well here *and* get caught up on some of that paperwork you always want.”

The door was closed very quietly. Even more quietly, Skinner crossed the small office space, politely handed Scully the toxicology report, then leaned both hands on the edge of the desk, looming over Mulder.

“I had paramedics running through the halls yesterday, Agent Mulder, and traffic out front stopped,” Skinner said, very clipped, very flat. “And I don’t want a repeat performance. Go home. Follow your doctors’ orders.”

“I’m fine, sir,” said Mulder, his demeanor an odd blend of insubordination and respect. “And Scully’s a doctor, she can—”

“*Agent* Scully can do her job, Mulder. She has reports due, and a lecture to give this afternoon at Quantico. She doesn’t have time to babysit an invalid.”

“But, sir—”

Skinner didn’t quite raise his voice. “When did you decide that your personal whims were more important than the Bureau’s directive? When did you decide—”

Mulder leaned back in his chair, his knuckles going white as he clutched the edge of the desk.

“Sir—”

“I know you’re not in the habit of listening to anyone but yourself, Agent Mulder, but I’m still speaking—”

“Sir...”





And with that, Mulder fainted, ignobly, dead away.

The world was blurred, sound warped, and Skinner still looking at him when Mulder finally opened his eyes again.

He was flat on his back on the floor, his tie off, his shirt half unbuttoned, his belt loosened. Scully was taking his pulse again and Skinner...oh God. Mulder actually regained some color, the blush rising fast and furiously: Skinner, Assistant Director Walter S. Skinner, his boss, his super-macho, buff, stereotype of an ex-Marine superior, was soothing a damp cloth over his forehead.

Scully and Skinner both looked at him. No questions of 'how do you feel,' probably because they knew he'd only lie and anyway, they could see for themselves how Mulder felt.

"I have the wastebasket right here if you need it," Scully said, then added, to Skinner: "I'll take him home."

"No."

No? Mulder squinted in surprise, trying to get a good look at his boss: it took fainting to get Skinner to let him stay?

"You have over a hundred agents, scientists and pathologists attending your lecture. You deal with that. I'll take him home."

Mulder dropped his head back onto the floor, faintness obviously threatening again. "I can drive—"

Two sharp-eyed stares turned on him.

"Uh, I can—" Mulder hurriedly regrouped. "I'll take a cab."

A quelling glare from his boss and an outright dangerous glower from his partner.

"Okay, Mom," Mulder said, "I'll let him take me home."

In the car, traffic miserable, the weather outside turning cold, Skinner sat and gripped the steering wheel tightly enough to turn his knuckles as pale as Mulder's face. He refused to look at his agent: he could see more than enough out the corner of his eye.

Mulder was shivering, sweating, looking pale and clammy and certainly not like someone well enough to come to work. Skinner clenched his teeth and fought the urge to yell at Mulder some more: what kind of idiot came into work the day after being poisoned? Hell, what kind of idiot could get

himself discharged from hospital the same day he was poisoned. Moron, idiot, fool. Find a windmill and there would be Fox Mulder tilting at it, even if the stupid bastard couldn't even manage to stand on his own.

Helping Mulder into the car had been... Mulder, stumbling, nearly falling, holding on for dear life when Skinner caught him, just holding on, eyes closed, trusting Skinner to guide him the last few steps, trusting Skinner to get him into the car without bumping his head. The way Mulder's hands, limp, had rested on his as he'd fastened Mulder's seat belt, Mulder's head dropping forward to rest on his shoulder, just for a second...

And now look at him. Getting him along the corridor to his apartment was going to be real fun.

By the time they reached Mulder's door, Mulder was sweating, the shivering had stepped up to shaking, and Skinner had the ominous feeling that he was going to be needing Scully's wastebasket pretty damned soon.

Skinner propped Mulder up beside the door. "Keys?"

Mulder swayed, closed his eyes. "Pocket."

That narrowed it down. Skinner started with the coat, moved on to jacket, yielded, and with a murmured, "Sorry," dug through the trouser pockets. Found the keys, and found Mulder.

Decided to pretend that he hadn't committed the ultimate *faux pas*.

Inside the apartment it was warm—snug even, the usual, comfortable clutter that spoke so clearly of Mulder. "Couch?"

Mulder looked at him, blinked slowly. "Bed."

Skinner steered, Mulder lurched, and they got him into the bedroom. The bed wasn't made, not surprisingly, rumpled navy and cream looking natural and inviting.

Skinner eased Mulder down to sit on the edge of the bed, knelt down to deal with Mulder's socks and shoes: Mulder was green enough around the gills that Skinner really didn't want to deal with the aftereffects of Mulder bending over.

Mulder was staring at him, an unattractive bug-eyed expression on his face. "Uh, I need to..."

"Throw up?"

Mulder glancing away, that unaccountable shyness peeking forth again. "I need a piss."

And there was no way Mulder could manage on his own.

Oh great.





Skinner took off his own coat and jacket, rolled his white shirt sleeves up for good measure. Brisk, brusque, indifferent: definitely the way to go. Or at least the right tone to hide behind. “Okay, let’s go.”

Mulder looked up at him, eyes darker than usual, bruised, or maybe that was just the dark circles underneath. “Come on,” Skinner repeated, less gruffly, as he got a good grip on Mulder and hauled him to his feet. He waited a moment until both Mulder’s low-voiced “ooooohhhh” and the dizzy swaying ceased before he started edging Mulder carefully towards the bathroom.

He held Mulder from behind, not looking, of course, as Mulder used the john. Held Mulder, and felt uneasy stirrings at the back of his mind. This was ridiculous, he told himself. He’d done far more personal things for his buddies back in ‘Nam, and he’d been this close to Mulder before.

But this time, it was...

He was acutely aware of Mulder’s contradictions: the height that was unnoticeable unless Mulder was standing beside Scully; the slenderness of hips and forearms and long legs that made Mulder look reedy—but up close, the shoulders were broad, and the chest was equally broad, and the back was strong, tapering down into narrow waist leading down to...

He looked around Mulder’s bathroom, somewhat surprised by how clean it was. There were the expected Mulderesque neat piles of stuff—a stack of books on the tank, a pile of magazines by the tub—but not the usual conditions expected when you walked into the apartment (or crime scene) of a single man.

And was it? God, yes: a yellow rubber ducky. Of course, this was Mulder: could be something he played with religiously once a week, or something put there just to play with the heads of anyone who came in to spy. Or put there because who would expect secret microfiche to be hidden in a kid’s rubber ducky?

Mulder was straightening up again, swaying backwards, and before Skinner realized what he was going to do, he was holding Mulder. Holding a sick Mulder upright, that was all. But Mulder was plastered all down his front, trembling slightly, hair smelling clean, feeling soft, his stomach warm where his shirt gaped and Skinner’s fingers were accidentally touching tender skin and silky hair.

Mulder nearly fell when Skinner let him go

without warning—stumbled again as Skinner grabbed him just as quickly. He didn’t fall, but his head was spinning, his stomach doing somersaults as Skinner pulled him in close and guided him back to the bed. All down his side and across his back—around his waist, too, one big arm holding him close and tight—was the warmth and strength of Walter Skinner. It was pathetic, it was feeble, but the certainty of the man, the sureness and the comfort of him was enough to make Mulder—

Goddamnit, no, he was *not* going to cry. He’d fainted, that was enough humiliation to last anyone a decade or five.

Fainting. At least he hadn’t fainted into Skinner’s arms.

Tempting though that sometimes was.

Well, what could anyone expect? The only person he was close to was the so-called ‘Ice Queen’ herself, who was never anything more than justifiably well-chilled around him. He could lean on Scully, depend on her, but guilt got in his way. She was ill herself, she had her own troubles and battles—and weaknesses, and needs. And barriers. But Skinner... Skinner was built like a brick outhouse and twice as sturdy. He could lean on Skinner: he could lean on Skinner and Skinner wouldn’t even notice.

He was being put to bed, something that wasn’t even a dim memory from childhood; his tie was in one of his pockets or on his desk, but now his shirt was being unbuttoned, eased off him. His belt, unbuckled; his waistband, unbuttoned; his zipper, undone. He should protest, do the macho “I can manage” thing, but to tell the truth, he felt like hell. And it was nice to have someone he could lean on, someone who could take care of him. Someone who actually wanted to take care of him.

You’re bleeding, Fox.

She had said that to him. Hadn’t wiped it away, offered a band aid, nothing. Just his mother’s patented frostily disappointed: *you’re bleeding, Fox*, in the same tone of voice she’d used when he was a kid coming home from school in the rain. You’re dripping, Fox. And he’d apologize, and wipe it up himself.

He hadn’t apologized for bleeding.

Because...

Because he’d been this close—*this* close—to hitting her.

Oh, God, he’d considered hitting his mother.

“You okay?”



He should lie. Pull that macho bullshit, and lie.
“No.” Muffled, because he was pressing his face into his pillow. Christ, he hadn’t done that since he was a kid. It was the weakness from being poisoned and purged, please let that be it.

Or it was the weakness of the memories he’d recovered, and his mom slapping him, and her voice: *you’re bleeding fox*.

yourebleedingfoxyourebleedingfoxyourebleedingfox

What the hell was he supposed to do with Mulder now? Crying agents he was used to: had to be, he’d had enough practice with them. But this wasn’t an overwrought bit of a snuffle or a fraught sobbing over bad news, a breakdown over a reprimand or OPC firing. This was... This was what a heart sounds like when it breaks.

Skinner stood beside Mulder’s bed, Mulder’s clothes in his hands, as close to dithering as he’d ever gotten.

Possible triggers for this ran through his mind, a convenient and necessary distraction from his own useless inaction. There was Mulder’s report, an elegant exercise in omission and obfuscation on the memory recovery treatment, and Scully’s report, too. That had been barely a week ago. On top of that, there had been that shit with Roche a few months earlier, and of course, the mess with his sister-clone-thing, Cancerman, paternity, and following in father’s footsteps.

And always, always, devouring everything, there was Scully’s cancer, abduction, the chip in her neck, Mulder’s guilt over it all. Yesterday at the hospital, when he’d wondered if there was any point in calling Mrs. Mulder to suggest she come down to see her son, Scully had hinted, darkly, about a scene between Mulder and his mother.

The saddest part of all, Skinner thought, was that there were so many probable causes to choose from.

He stood there long enough for the awkwardness to reach a rawly uncomfortable pitch. He just watched Mulder, cursing himself, and everyone else in Mulder’s life: he was no better than the rest of them, or the worst of them, standing here just *watching*, useless, pointless—

Skinner took a deep breath, then gathered up all his well-reasoned arguments, arguments that had held him immobile on that line for too damned long and threw those pathetic rationales out a metaphorical window. At long last leaving what he

labeled *cowardice* behind, he gave in to what he wanted to do and ignored what a supervisor *ought* to do, finally reaching out, real-world consequences be damned. He sat down on Mulder’s bed, beside Mulder’s mainly naked body. Diffident at first, until the shock wore off, then he was rubbing soothing circles on Mulder’s back, waiting out the sounds of distress, twisting round until he could stroke and smooth Mulder’s back with both hands.

His own back was aching from the torqued position he was in, but he didn’t want to leave Mulder like this. Fuck, he wouldn’t leave that black-lunged bastard alone in this condition. Carefully, never breaking contact, Skinner shifted until he was sitting, more or less comfortably, with his back resting against the headboard. He tugged, gently, urging Mulder nearer so he could reach him more easily.

Mulder mumbled, shifted away a little, buried his head deeper in his pillow.

The mumble had sounded like “sorry.”

“Don’t be so fucking ridiculous,” Skinner snapped at Mulder, grabbing him inelegantly, hauling Mulder up into his arms, Mulder pulling away—Embarrassed? Humiliated more than enough for today already?—Skinner hauling him in again, sliding down on the bed until he was lying flat, Mulder trapped, still resisting, in his arms.

“Settle down, Mulder,” he grumbled. “I’m not letting go, so you might as well get used to it. Come on,” soothing, now, stroking Mulder’s back again, up, and down, up, and down, “relax, let it go, there’s nobody here to hear you.”

Another mumble, Skinner able to make out enough to guess Mulder had said something about Skinner being there and that was worse than half the Bureau because they already laughed at him.

Skinner bent his left knee, easing the strain on his back: Mulder packed some heft for all he looked so skinny. “You tired of my Vietnam stories yet?”

Under his stroking hands, Mulder’s muscles tightened for a moment, then relaxed, just a bit.

“I told you, I was only 18.”

A nod, rubbing into his right shoulder.

“My first time away from home. Furthest I’d ever gone was to town, and that was only 5,000 people. I took the bus to town, signed up, and I was in boot camp three days later. Before I got used to that, training was over and I was shipped out.”

Felt Mulder shudder with him, as memories overtook him, and imagination overtook Mulder.



“My first day in ’Nam, I was sent to my unit, some fuck-up with the paperwork, so my first week there I was in country, being shot at, shooting back.”

He remembered it. Remembered the sounds and the sight and God, the smells. The smell that came from a body that had been a man two seconds ago.

Man? He swallowed hard, held Mulder tight, and now it was Mulder’s hands stroking, up, and down, up, and down, along his side, along his stomach. “My first kill, my first charlie—” Swallow again. Remembering this, he didn’t want to remember this. “Not as bad as the kid I told you about, but this was the first. Worst thing I’d ever known, back then. He was maybe 14. Looked younger. He came out of the trees, aiming at me, I shot him—didn’t even blink or stop to think. Pure instinct, him or me, just shot this kid. Clean through the chest. Knocked him back onto the ground.”

The moment his finger squeezed the trigger, before the deafening sounds of live ammunition exploding hotly from his gun, there had been dark brown eyes looking right into his own. A mirror, a brown-faced mirror, staring at him, younger than him, older than he’d ever be, bright shiny eyes going dull, glazing. Counterpoint: the sound of his gun, the sound of the body hitting the ground, the smell...

“I shit myself. Had to wash in a sump puddle, put my fatigues on wet. That night—”

In his hootch, curling in on himself, thinking about Mom sitting sewing while Dad watched *Bonanza*, wondering what that kid’s mom was doing, if she knew her boy was dead yet.

“I was okay. But there were more patrols, and more shooting. Bringing back our own guys, body bags slimy with blood and shit and piss, or if they were hit, listening to them screaming or cursing or trying to breathe round the pain...”

A soft bump against his cheek, Mulder sliding up him, snuggling up into him, offering silent comfort, wet cheek against his own.

“My sarge—” Blown up. Blown to bits. The corpsman gathering body parts, trying to figure out which arm went with which leg. But before that. Long before that. “I went nuts one night. Completely fucking crazy. My sarge pushed everyone off me, and they were saying he was crazy too because they’d only just got me down, but he kicked them out of the tent and he fought me down and...”

Soft as down, breath against his cheek, words in his ear. “You cried.”

“Yes.”

And realized that in letting Mulder give comfort, he wasn’t waiting for disapproval or mockery or shame; not from Mulder.

Realized what he was waiting for when he felt the first scant touch of lips against his cheek.

Oh God.

Oh dear God in Heaven, yes, this was what he’d been waiting for.

What, in the end, he hadn’t had the guts to seize for himself.

He heard himself make a sound, heard it echoed by the man in his arms. Enveloped Mulder in his embrace, rolling over until Mulder was under him. Another kiss, open-mouthed, tongue against his lips, and he opened his own mouth, welcomed Mulder inside. Kissed him, kissed him deeply, tasting him, the sourness of tears, and the sweetness of desire. It wasn’t what he’d intended, nowhere was ‘fuck Mulder’ on his To Do list for today, but the desire had been in him so long, pressed down so far, repressed so damn hard that, let loose, it exploded through him, went straight to his head, and his cock, and his hands. He couldn’t get enough, couldn’t get close enough, couldn’t get *in* far enough, pulling Mulder closer and tighter and kissing him harder and deeper. He could hear them both, the wet sounds of open mouths, the murmurs and moans swallowed into the other’s mouth, the rasp of cloth on fabric. He squeezed even harder, then slid Mulder ever closer, pressing his hard cock against Mulder’s not-hard groin.

Too fast, the thought struggled through the high tide of his arousal, going too fast and too far, too soon.

Common sense slowly coming back to him as he pressed against a too-warm Mulder, not all of the shivering due to any romantic cliché of feverish passion. He struggled with himself for a moment, then wrestled his hunger and lust under control. Reined himself in, gentled the kiss until it was the sweetest stroke of tongue on tongue.

Too soon, after yesterday, for Mulder; cruel, really, to expect a man to perform, and wouldn’t that be just a great way to start out. And there was the lingering image of a decidedly green around the gills Mulder. “Later,” he said, lips still touching Mulder’s. “After you’ve slept for an hour.”

Mulder pulled back far enough to look at Skinner; his best arguments being marshaled.





"Yeah?" Mulder demanded, hand cupping Skinner's crotch, cock hard against his palm. "I never figured you for a masochist. Sir."

He was almost disappointed when Skinner didn't have a comeback to that. "Mulder, I've known how to take care of myself for a while now, once I get you settled—"

"Let me."

"Mulder," Skinner's voice was a caress against his ear, Skinner's arms implacable as they stopped Mulder's foray against Skinner's zipper and Mulder was shifted into a comfortable embrace that was frighteningly close to a cuddle. "When was the last time you fainted?"

Mulder wasn't about to answer that, it'd been embarrassing enough the first time.

"And when, precisely, did you stop puking?"

Going round one too many corners in the car, feeling...

"Hey, I was only offering to lend you a hand," Mulder said, hooking one hand around Skinner's neck, pulling him in for another kiss.

"And I appreciate that," Skinner said, making Mulder smile with that oh-so-formal tone, "but I think I'll take a rain check on that till you're, oh, I guess, maybe back up to 50%?"

The entrenched 'I'm fine' nearly escaped him, but Skinner wasn't expecting that, wasn't asking just so that Skinner himself could be let off the hook. Skinner was just being...Skinner, not demanding a damn thing from Mulder other than honesty and common sense.

And if he stopped lying to himself, he'd admit that he wasn't exactly up to his best at this precise moment in time: if after the intensity of all that kissing—and rubbing and stroking and generalized all-over body to body squirming—he still wasn't hard, then it wasn't going to happen, no matter how much he hated admitting it. Besides, after fainting and nearly throwing up, being the 'before' ad for Viagra would just make his day. Tentatively, testing the very unfamiliar waters of acceptance, Mulder asked: "Promise?"

Faint smile, crow's feet showing at the corners of Skinner's eyes. "Promise."

Something he could depend on. Something he could believe in. Something that he didn't have to perform the right role for. Mulder disentangled himself enough to straighten Skinner's glasses, running his finger behind Skinner's ear, pleased with the shiver of response that got. Tenderly,

shivering himself at the intimacy given him, he took Skinner's glasses off. Leaned over him to put them on the side table. Leaned back, into the strength of Skinner's arms and the weird sensation of being able to just relax and simply be.

Brown eyes, looking down at him: quite beautiful, the way they'd been the first time Skinner had talked about Vietnam. Brown eyes, utterly vulnerable, far more than they'd been that day.

So, today he'd fainted, fallen apart and wept in this man's arms: and Skinner had managed to turn that around, from humiliation, to shared weakness, to shared strength.

There was hope for the world after all.

"Later," he said, and protested not at all as a big hand cupped the back of his head, and tucked him in against Skinner's warmth.

Mulder eased in closer, kissed Skinner again, insistently—promising.

"Later," he heard, and again, "later," as exhaustion overtook him. "Later," a mere whisper, as the hands stroked his back, up, and down, up, and down, up...

Skinner waited until Mulder was deeply asleep, not that it took long. Longer, perhaps, and he'd have just let it go, but he was still hard, still hot, just from those few minutes when he'd let loose and Mulder had met him more than half way. Quietly, very carefully, Skinner eased himself free of Mulder, pulled the bathroom door almost completely closed behind himself.

Hand inside his pants, he stopped; opened the door again until he could see Mulder sprawled asleep in bed. He shoved his pants down, spat in his hand, stroked his cock, staring at Mulder's mouth, the shallow vale of Mulder's spine, the curve of his ass—couldn't stop looking at that, thinking about the yield of muscle, the flex as Mulder moved, what it would be like to take Mulder, ass spread for him, Mulder's hole hot and tight around him as he pushed in, heat, moisture. He spat on his hand, stroking himself fast now, cradling his balls with his left hand—Mulder's mouth on his balls, Mulder's tongue at his ass, rimming him, oh, yeah, tongue going inside him, the way he was going to fuck Mulder, fuck him hard and... That was it: the last stroke, and it rose through him, out of him, pleasure tightening and loosening its grip on him as he loos-





ened his own grip on his cock. He gentled his cock, touching it softly, feeling the last of it spurt from him, then just a few drops, sliding from him, easing him back down.

He cleaned himself up, grabbed a couple of towels from over Mulder's shower rail in case Mulder woke up feeling worse than before, went back into the bedroom. For a second, he couldn't bring himself to just climb in beside Mulder, something gibbering at the back of his mind about commitment and need and failure. About the real world. About the way he was with Mulder.

Called himself a coward, and folded his clothes on top of a stack of magazines lying on a chair. Moving as lightly as he knew how, he slid back into bed, Mulder nearly waking up, murmuring something incomprehensible as Skinner accepted Mulder's blind seeking of contact.

Lying awake, Mulder asleep in his arms and three-quarters across him, Skinner had the time to wonder what it was about this man that he spilled his guts to him. Told him things no one else alive

knew about; told him things that should make Skinner feel weak, pathetic, a sorry excuse for a man. But didn't.

Left him, instead, feeling pretty damned proud of himself for breaking his own personal code of silence. Scaling walls he'd spent so many years building. Coming out from his fortress of Work and Justice and being Strong.

Feeling, really feeling, for the first time in years.

Mulder shifted restlessly, and Skinner went back to stroking him, soft, easy, passes up and down Mulder's back, relishing the heavy weight slumbering atop him. Relishing this feeling of connection. Of not being alone.

Wondering if these things—the corollaries between his life and Mulder's, faith lost and Samantha lost, work and the search and all the rest of it—were what drew Mulder to him.

Something else to ponder.

Something else to answer.

Later.

There would be a later.





Trinity

An alternative version of the scene in Tunguska. Mulder bringing Skinner a new toy to play with. Skinner calling Krycek *boy*. You think I could resist something like that? This was originally (many, many, many moons ago) an email to a friend, one of my infamous instances of going from 'it would be interesting if' discussion to sliding into actually writing—usually halfway through a sentence!

The last moments of mundanity, dragging Krycek from the car, slamming him into the elevator, the last edges of normal life crumpling like burnt paper dying in a fire, sudden sharp looks, sudden sharp sound, sudden sharp awareness, the whole dissolving into its component parts.



Last ditch effort, taking a deep breath before knocking on Skinner's door, the too casual words illuminating the tension, and then the sharp light of the outside world is gone, door closing them all inside, just them, just the three of them, and everything is different.

The jittering, fluttering crackle of silent movies, the images jumping and starting, flaring and fading, discrete, jagged, solitary, but jumbling together into a whole.

Bare chest, hairy.

Flicker of fear under defiance in green eyes.

Plain room, spartan, clean, cold, no familiar smells.

Skinner zipping his fly.

Naked toes, clench of chest muscle, bulk of arms.

Grabbing Alex Krycek by the back of the neck. Crunching voice, calling him *boy*.

Making the threat Mulder has known would come with the safehouse.

Ripping the clothes off Krycek, *ripping* his clothes—and another threat Mulder has suspected. Hoped for.

The vengeance for which he himself doesn't have the stomach.

Or the balls.

Skinner, pushing Krycek to his knees, unzipping his pants again, no underwear underneath, pushing his trousers open, his cock rising from his trousers—

Nostrils twitching, flaring, striving for the scent of him, too



far away, keeping to the wall, hiding, skulking, watching—

—as Skinner, hard just from the power of the situation, keeping Krycek on his knees.

Green eyes staring at him, green eyes sending that sharp stare beyond the sweep and flex of Skinner's back, emerald shards stabbing beyond pale satin.

Gravel voice, down deep, the curve of Skinner's ass, bending forward, baffle-wall blunting the sharp rising yell from Krycek of how he's not like this he doesn't want this he won't take this asshole cocksucker son of a bitch he does not want this—

But the words are pouring from a mouth suddenly wet as a summer storm, and his eyes are naked with hunger.

Naked as Skinner's cock, startling, Priapus made flesh, the thrust of power and anger and revenge.

Mulder leans closer to the wall, deeper into the shadows, wanting to cast no light into the darkness tonight.

Skinner's voice continuing, while Krycek's is ending, the wet mouth out of words, and before the protest signs are dry, he's sucking, sucking hard on Skinner's cock.

And the throat that gives up that groan of lust is not Skinner's, nor Krycek's, the shadows not deep enough to hide Mulder.

Krycek leaning forward, tongue flickering moistly in the faded light of the city, no protests now, just swallowing down hard before Skinner even tells him do, shoving that cock all the way down his throat, burying his face against Skinner, slurping at his cock, breathing in deep, glorying in Skinner's smell, and Mulder wants it to be him.

On his knees, or standing there, legs akimbo, cock worshipped.

Sound, slivers of sound sliding down his spine, the sound of sin stiffening his cock.

Faint light sparking a taboo against metal, Krycek's handcuffed hands reaching down to stroke his own cock as Skinner cups the back of Krycek's neck.

Mulder looking down, Skinner looking down, at the moonlight still kissing the metal bracelets decorating Krycek's wrists; and then another sound, familiar and mundane to anyone in their profession, reality intruding, cruel and cold as fluorescent light. Clink, clink, whisper, the sound of a prisoner in custody.

Skinner stops, the pretending stops, Skinner looking at the handcuffs holding his prisoner securely.

Skinner stepping back, Mulder stepping forward, incipient protest.

Skinner withdrawing, brow furrowing, cock glistening wetly from Krycek's mouth, his words glittering harshly amidst the labored breathing. Sandpaper voice, saying this is wrong, this is abuse of power, this is abuse of Office, his code, his honor...

And Krycek, kneeling there, no protests, no lies, the honesty sitting uneasily on his face, uncomfortable in his eyes. Voice hoarse from sucking cock, reciting the litany of damning evidence, the list of every wrong Krycek has ever done, of every wrong Krycek has ever imagined doing, rubbing it in, dressing it up in evil and draping it in wickedness.

Begging now, truth bringing him truly to his knees.

Mulder jangling forward, hand fumbling downwards.

Skinner turning away, resisting the temptation, nearly stumbling as he stuffs his cock back inside his trousers, starting over towards the phone.

And then sounds, coiling through the room and the shadows and all three men, green-eyed serpent in Eden, dangerous knowledge ripe on the branch: "Forgive me, father, for I have sinned."

Turning then, slowly, looking at Krycek.

Staring as the handcuffed hands struggle and strive, until Krycek is kneeling there, naked and hard and needy, his cock rising straight up against his belly, his mouth still wet from where he's been sucking Skinner's cock.

"Forgive me," Krycek whispers again. "Father, I have sinned."

Skinner, rubbing a hand over the naked heat of his skull.

Mulder, rubbing his hand over the covered heat of his cock.

Krycek's voice, rubbing against them like a cat in the night.

"I have done wrong, Father. I have done terrible wrongs. I have been bad, Father."

Skinner, walking forward, rubbing a hand over the naked heat of his chest.

Mulder, stepping nearer, rubbing a hand over the naked heat of his cock.

Krycek's tongue rubbing wetly over his parted lips.

"I have been so bad, Father. Punish me, Father."



Give me penance, forgive me, Father, for I have sinned...”

Mulder’s voice, whispering mist, murmuring echo of Krycek’s words, the darkest conspiracy of all.

And with that, Skinner is lost, they are all lost, in this, in forgiveness and penance, sin and redemption. Eyes gentle as they meet Mulder’s across Krycek’s nakedness; mouth tender as he runs his fingers over the softness of hair shorter than Mulder’s, runs his fingers round the lips reddened almost as full as Mulder’s, as he slides his fingers inside, watching Mulder’s eyes as Krycek’s close, staring at Mulder’s lips as Krycek’s close round his fingers, feeling it as Mulder sucks on his own fingers as Krycek sucks on Skinner’s.

Withdrawing again, to lean down to kiss, gently, sweetly, letting Krycek feel his blessing, his forgiveness, letting Krycek take it for Mulder. Seeing the need in those wide eyes, seeing the need for the return of innocence. Knowing what it will take. Knowing he can give it. Worse, knowing he would enjoy giving it. Knowing how much he needs this himself.

And Mulder, watching, as one, as both, the other two commingling in him.

Skinner giving Krycek the blessing of another kiss, meeting Mulder’s gaze over the rapt face, the sweet forgiveness of his hand stroking the vulnerable nape.

Acceptance. Blessing. Forgiveness.

Time, now, for confession, redemption, penance.

Krycek’s need-filled, grateful gaze watching every move, Skinner pulls his leather belt free from his belt loops, slides it behind Krycek’s neck.

“Tell me your sins, Alex. Tell me your sins, and I will give you penance, and forgiveness. Tell your father everything, Alex...”

And uses the heavy leather to pull Krycek forward, Mulder drawn closer, puppet snared by the tendrils of desire, the blessings of punishment and purgatory.

Krycek’s mouth opening in ravening hunger, sucking Skinner in, Mulder sucking in a breath, deep breath, betraying the trembling in him, body and soul.

Mulder ghosting forward, the three of them together now, touching at last, as the whisper caresses their exposed skin, as Alex takes his flesh within.

Whisper, drifting between them: this is my body...



Band of Gold

A friend said in email that she wanted a story where they were tired and they just picked food up at some point. This, oddly enough, is what ended up being extrapolated from that! This is set a couple of months or so after Avatar and is in the great fannish tradition of stories to explain away continuity glitches!



The motel clerk didn't even look askance when Skinner took Mulder's room key, which fact gave Skinner pause, even if Mulder didn't seem to notice.

Of course, in his present condition, Mulder wouldn't notice Janet Reno and Louis Freeh doing the horizontal bop in the middle of the lobby floor.

"This way—" Skinner said, lassoing Mulder before Mulder could meander through the 'Staff Only' door. "Out this way—"

It wasn't easy, maneuvering two garment bags and one Fox Mulder combined with a glass door, but he managed, even steering Mulder past the wilted flowerbeds and over the concrete tire blocks that littered the parking lot like so many scattered bones.

Which was probably what Mulder was thinking right now, judging by the tightness of the skin around Mulder's eyes.

Not a bad case, not compared to some, certainly not bad when held up against the cases Mulder had handled in the ISU.

Patterson was such a little prick, letting Mulder—hard to imagine Mulder fresh out of college, fresh to the FBI, all bright-shining and new—get to that stage. Hard to forgive Patterson for not noticing or not caring the condition Mulder had been in.

No, this case hadn't been bad, Skinner thought, snagging Mulder by the coat collar and pushing him through the now-opened motel room door, but it hadn't been a nice one, and it was just that bit too similar to some of the really bad ones.

He had the garment bags hung up in the closet and Mulder dumped on the bed before his agent came back into focus. "Where's Scully?"

Barely begun the drive that was way beyond Mulder's current reserves. "On her way back to DC," Skinner said easily,



knowing full well that not an atom of his worry showed in his voice or on his face. “I put her in charge of the rest of the team—they’re taking Smith back for further questioning.”

Spacey, exhaustion—or hopefully an emotion as benign as exhaustion—slurring the words together. “He did it.”

“We know he did, Mulder,” more gently than he intended, more gently than he ought, “we just need to get him to implicate himself enough for probable cause so we can search *all* of his properties.”

A vague nod, Mulder’s gaze moving off to the side again.

Skinner stood in the middle of the bland little room and looked down at Mulder sprawled on the bed like road kill.

‘Make him eat,’ Scully had said just this side of insubordination. And making Mulder eat was better than standing here as useful as tits on a bull.

Night had landed with a visible thud while he’d been out trying to find some place open this time on an off-season Sunday, but he wasn’t surprised that the light wasn’t on or that Mulder lay exactly where he’d left him, eyes closed, breathing low and steady.

Skinner allowed himself all of fifteen seconds to look—just look, nothing more—before turning on the lamp farthest from Mulder.

Snap of movement, Mulder upright, hand reaching for gun, only reluctantly leaving the weapon behind to rub at bruised-looking eyes.

“What time is it?”

“Dinner time—kind of. This is all I could find open.”

“Hey,” an actual smile, drugged up from somewhere, “hope you super-sized me.”

Skinner absolutely did not permit himself to look at Mulder’s crotch. “Sure. Big Mac okay?”

If pressed—say by a loaded Uzi held to his head by a raging lunatic with an irrational hatred of balding men—Skinner might even admit that it came close to hurting, to see how much effort it took for Mulder to fake this little bit of normalcy.

“Right now, I’d even take a MacRib.”

Skinner handed over one of the bags, lamplight glinting on the one piece of jewelry he’d worn in his entire life—and there it was again: Mulder’s expression closing down, a distantly polite facade shuttering down, closing Mulder in, locking Skinner out.

“Thank you, sir. How much do I owe you?”

Dammit, they’d talked about this, actually honest to goodness *talked* about it and now Mulder was pulling this— “Don’t worry, I’ll put it on my expenses.”

One of Mulder’s small nods, and then there were a few moments sorting out brown bags and ketchup, followed by the conversation-killing click of the remote.

When the ceaseless click of channel surfing had abandoned them on Martha Stewart making stuffed quails eggs, the shower beckoned.

“I’m taking a shower—you need to use the john first?”

Not a glance at him. “No, I’m fine.”

And that had the sting of an oft-heard denial. Mulder, doing a Scully on him.

Damn.

Another second, two, didn’t change anything, Mulder apparently engrossed in the finer details of how to empty quails eggs without breaking the shell.

“Fine,” Skinner muttered, and left him to it.

The shower was much better than he had any hope to expect given the rest of the motel, water running hot and wild over him, drenching his shoulders, easing the tension in his back—adding to the tension in his front. He soaped himself, let his hand linger.

Shook the water from his head, stuck his head outside the shower curtain, but Mulder was still listening to Martha Stewart.

Fine.

It was all fucking fine.

The curtain rings rattled as he hauled the curtain back, and the soap was silent as he ran it over his skin, over the hair on his chest. Lower, to where hair ran out and soft skin began, and where hardness began, too. He stroked himself, two-handed, looking down at his cock between his fists, soap suds running white as come from the tip of him. Hand over fist, he pulled at his cock, running one hand beneath, to rub and roll his balls, to stroke the loose skin as it tightened, balls rising up to join the hardness of his cock. Warm, warmer than his hands, not as warm as the water sheeting over him, the very tip of his cock shoving out from between his two hands, a different shade from his tanned hands, redder, more blood in his cock, vein pulsing, pleasure pulsing, and he came, fast and easy and...





Transient, lonely pleasure. Pointing out how empty it was. Meaningless.

Dammit to hell, he used to *enjoy*, simply enjoy, every orgasm, every single simply-for-pleasure one of them, not turn it into a state of the union address.

But that was before he was in here with Mulder out there.

More out there than usual.

For a long moment, he rested his forehead against the wall and let the water pour hotly over his shoulders.

He finished drying his feet, wiped the mirror clean, didn't bother to unsteam his glasses or put them on: there were times when not seeing clearly was a distinct blessing not to be passed up. Out of habit or forlorn hope or pathetic loserhood, he shaved, electric razor buzzing over his skin. Brushed his teeth. Pulled on a pair of pale gray sweatpants. Put on his glasses. Faced himself.

Then went in to face Mulder.

Martha Stewart had been replaced by a documentary on 3,000-year-old red-haired mummies found in the Chinese desert.

"I didn't know China had a desert."

Mulder barely glanced at him; didn't appear to notice that Skinner was half-naked and barely concealed by clinging gray cotton. "It does."

Nice to know everything was still fine.

Fine. When Mulder was like this, there was nothing anyone could do with him, bar watching him to make sure the stupid bastard didn't have any more dreams that led him to letting child-molesting serial killers run loose.

Very deliberately, Skinner unclenched his jaw.

That was then, this is now. And the past week had been tough, had no doubt brought up a shitload of memories best left buried. Mulder was entitled to be moody, if anyone was. Anyway, Mulder was prone to moodiness at the best of times—which none of them had seen for too long—so it wasn't surprising—

He could feel Mulder looking at him.

Specifically, he could feel Mulder looking at his hand. Third finger, left hand.

There was no getting away from it. Not tonight.

If he was honest, not for a long time.

Since his separation, if he faced the truth: the truth about more than one thing. More than one person.

Mulder had looked away and looked back again at where the plain gold band still made its silent statement.

He looked at it himself, for a long time. Twisted it, round and round and round like life. Like himself, and Mulder. Going round in circles. Circling each other. Endlessly.

This small amount of gold marked 17 years, 18 if you counted this last rollercoaster attempt to save it.

It was surprisingly easy, now, at last, when it had come down to the wire. He took the gold band off his finger, and with it, took off years of loyalty and infidelity, love and indifference, passion and fond friendship. A whole life.

There was a small sound as he put his ring—her ring—down on the bedside table that separated his bed from Mulder's.

Then silence, one that lingered, grew, became uncomfortable.

It shocked him, that the television blurred in front of his eyes, as the silence was all there was between him and Mulder.

Oh yeah. Everything was just fine.

He didn't say anything, because there was nothing to be said—nothing that hadn't been said, clearly, by the laying down of that ring.

A run was out of the question; there was a reason he'd promised Scully he wouldn't leave Mulder alone tonight. A reason he hadn't wanted to leave Mulder alone. Had even entertained notions of holding Mulder till some of the fatigue and the memories eased.

He wished he'd picked up Johnny Walker instead of Big Macs. Or Mulder.

His watch was still in the bathroom, the motel clock glued to the furniture so he couldn't see it without getting up.

Well, it was already too late; no reason why it shouldn't be late enough to get some sleep.

A loud click, and now the only light was the flickering colored glow from the television, and the muted flare of headlights through the thin curtain. At least the sheets were crisp and clean, the mattress firm enough to sleep on.

He turned onto his side, while behind him, the channels started rolling past, a staccato wave of changing sounds.

Oh yeah, everything was just fine.

Sleep was no nearer, and neither was Mulder,





although the TV had been on the same channel for a while now.

“It wasn’t the ring.”

Carefully, Skinner rolled over to see the expression that went with that blunt little enigma.

Mulder was doing something with his hands, and even though it was too dark to make out details, Skinner was pretty sure he knew what Mulder was twisting round and round. “What wasn’t the ring?”

“Not having sex with you tonight.”

Cautious, wary of Mulder in this mood. “Yes?”

“It hasn’t stopped me before.”

“But it stopped you tonight.”

“I told you—” Mulder biting the shout off before it could escalate, continuing in a perfectly modulated tone, “it wasn’t the ring.”

Okay, if that was to be tonight’s bed time story, so be it. “Then what was it?”

Shrug, Mulder’s bare shoulders bathed in the shifting light of the television. “This week.” Half smile, half grimace. “What this case brought back to me.”

“Then why—” No: Mulder was fragile tonight, push him the wrong way and it’d be tears.

“Why what?”

Familiar tone of voice, pit bull with its teeth sunk into something. “Why did you stare at my ring? Why did you react to it in the first place?”

Another shrug, Mulder fumbling, dropping the ring, picking it up again. “It was there.”

“It’s been there for a long time—”

“Like a magic trick.”

“Meaning?”

“Now you see it, now you don’t.”

“We already talked about this—”

“Yeah, and you don’t talk about things, I know, I know.”

So it was going to be like that. No matter what he said, it was going to be wrong, and silence was going to be worse.

Fuck.

“Okay—” Mulder said unexpectedly, looking at him. “It really wasn’t the ring, Walter, but Christ, just for once, just for *today*—” crime scene photos, and the interviews with Smith’s parents and the victims’ parents, all in the space of four and a half hours— “I didn’t want to be second best,” her ring, being put down, “that’s all, you didn’t have to—”

“Didn’t I?”

The silence grew, again.

After a while, the television was turned off, and there was the rustle and creak of someone settling down for the night. There should have been the sound of deepening, slowing breathing, but there was only the intermittent sounds of someone trying to lie still and be quiet.

And hanging over it all, the pall of silence.

This time, Skinner wasn’t even surprised that he ended up breaking it himself. “You know how you don’t want to be second best?”

He could feel Mulder listening to him in the dark.

“Neither do I.”

“But you’re not—”

“If it had been Scully who’d stayed here with you tonight, what would you have done?”

They both knew the answer to that: Mulder had lived it often enough, and Skinner had seen it, more than once, Mulder at his mother’s bedside, dissolving into tears and Scully’s arms, the knowledge between them too sharp for words.

Words, thrown out into the dark, aimed unerringly at Mulder’s heart. “I know I’m not good at talking about things, but maybe talking isn’t the only thing.”

Waiting, to hear Mulder’s reaction to that.

Nothing.

And then:

Indeterminate fabric-y noises, a shadow limned dimly, approaching. His own blankets being raised, cold air and nearly cold skin sliding against him. Mulder, big, awkward—goosebumps from more than just the chill of the night air.

Fitting together uneasily, bodies more used to sexual joining than this easing against each other.

A gusted sigh against the side of his neck. Long fingers stroking his chest, playing with the curls of hair, with the rising press of his nipples.

Another sigh, damp, this time, Mulder heavy and tense in his arms, Mulder’s hand roving lower, touching him.

“Is this what you give Scully for letting you hold on till the worst of it passes?”

Rigid muscles against him, a fine trembling arising.

He knew the exact moment Mulder’s honesty kicked in.

He kissed him then, on the side of the neck, on the lobe of his ear. Held him tight, and waited out the worst of it.

Time crawling past, moribund.



The worst of it easing, a change in the way
Mulder lay in his arms, a change in the way he held
Mulder. Then, as the familiar thrumming tension
knotted tired muscles, he held Mulder even tighter,
kissing him, deeply, stroking him easily and in no

particular hurry, to orgasm. Held him still, while
Mulder sank immediately into sleep.
Held him, and lay awake, watching the early
morning light glint on gold.



Skintone

I was getting very annoyed because I kept on writing too many stories where “Scully finds out and there’s no sex” and too many stories where I could not—for the life of me—get them into bed. I wanted an old-fashioned PWP, a romp, sex, sex, and more sex—and I’d had just one person too many say, when finding out that I’d really fallen for Sk/M, “but he’s *bald!*” frequently followed by variations on why this meant that Mulder couldn’t possibly like Skinner. Ahem. Let’s just say that I don’t agree!

He put his pen down at last, and twisted his neck to crunch the tension out of it.

From behind him: “Finished?”

He nodded, stretching his back out, unsurprised when hands came down warmly on his shoulders and slowly spun him around, the leather of his favorite old desk chair creaking slightly.

The television was on, basketball judging by the snatches of names coming to him, but the only other light came from the lamp on his desk, lambency that caught on glimpses of bare hands and bare feet, and a face that was bare of all masks.

Home.

He was home, work finally finished, and this place was home because of the man here with him right now, to be downright sentimental about it.

Embarrassment snared him; faint dismay that he could think such things, that he could, still, need such things. Home, and someone in it.

Well, it was okay so long as he didn’t stoop to flowers and scented candles.

And as long as he could subsume his awkward feelings in the heat of passion: his hands taking Mulder’s weight, his face creasing into a smile as Mulder clambered onto the chair, all legs and hunger; those long legs astride him now, that gorgeous, much-appreciated ass resting heavily on his own strong thighs. His arms were overflowing with Mulder, his mouth full of Mulder, and in between the kissing and the touching, Mulder shifted on him, until that luscious ass was pressing down, just right, onto his crotch, sliding and canting and stroking.

It was one of his favorite things, happiness and lust marching





through him as he cupped Mulder's ass, palms taunted by the flex and clench of Mulder's muscles, his cock perking up enthusiastically under the supple undulations of Mulder against it. Definitely one of his favorite things, from the very start of this, a perfectly understandable favorite, which was, of course, more than could be said for Mulder's sexual peccadilloes. He pressed Mulder's ass down onto his groin again, just the right angle, just the perfect pressure, while he allowed Mulder to indulge in one of Mulder's lesser fetishes: Mulder kissing and licking and running his open wet mouth over Skinner's head, murmuring and sighing, making little mmm-mmm sounds of satisfaction deep in his throat, his hands coming up to join in what his mouth was doing, fingertips tracing every dip and bump like a Victorian phrenologist but with oh so much more passion, until Skinner knew his skin would be shining, and Mulder's eyes would be half-closed in animal pleasure.

Skinner leaned back, took his glasses off, relaxed into this, his mouth quirking in amusement. To think he'd fretted for years over losing his hair, all of Sharon's blandishments making not one whit of a difference. Maybe he'd have felt differently if she'd been kinky for baldness the way Mulder was.

"Like this, Fox?" he asked, his left hand sliding up the inside of Mulder's left thigh.

"Your hand or your head?"

"Both. And any kind of head you can think of."

The tip of his ear was bitten, a tongue slaked inside his ear, breath blowing cool and shivery, the arousal going straight to his cock.

"Wicked," Mulder whispered, moving round so he was standing in front of Skinner, and then nothing was said for a moment while Mulder indulged his mouth with more caressing of that taut, smooth skin. "God, I love your head—"

Both hands flat against the front of Mulder's charcoal-gray trousers, his hands pulling the fabric tight, Mulder's erection pushing the fabric even tighter, Skinner nearly groaning at the sensory overkill: sight, sound, touch, taste, smell, feeling. Mulder's skin smelled wonderful, a tang of sweat, the hint of musk; his eyes feasting on the sight of Mulder hardness, cock erect and jutting, wanting him, needing him, the tip clear through the creased trousers, but he lost that focus as the tip of Mulder's tongue dipped into his ear again. Mulder's hips were pressing against his hands,

strength to strength, and Skinner slid down in his seat, so that he could pull Mulder closer, his own legs spread wide enough that as Mulder knelt for him, Mulder fitted against him perfectly. Then Mulder's mouth was on his head, again, kissing and licking and swirling shapes that didn't quite tickle, but made him shiver, pleasurable. Skinner thought about asking what it was about his head that appealed so to Mulder, but that seemed...unseemly, conceited.

Mulder, playing psychic again. "You know what I love about your head?"

Women always said they liked bald men, but this was Mulder. After the confession about Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, despite the probable boost to his ego, did he really want to know why Mulder found his bald head sexy? No choice given him in the sibilant undulations of Mulder's groin against his own, no choice over finding out Mulder's sexual motivation this time, the flat voice rumbled with desire.

"It's naked. So naked. Bare. Revealed, nothing hidden, so vulnerable, and right there, naked—"

The ever-surprising Mulder. Just when you thought you knew when to dread another True Confession, he hit you with normalcy, and sense, and an inspirational degree of sincerity. "Naked, huh?" Skinner asked, biting one of Mulder's nipples, a deep-throated groan the entirety of his answer. "I can take a hint," Skinner said, unbuttoning his shirt.

"Good," Mulder murmured, one hand darting down to ruffle through Skinner's chest hair, finding and tweaking a nipple, gentle the way Skinner liked it, gentle as Skinner had been rough for Mulder. "You ever think..." Another pause, while Mulder's tongue delved into the tiny depression at the front of Skinner's head, there, on the right, where the bayonet had creased him in 'Nam. Tongue tip, delicate, then broad swathe of tongue, then kisses covering him, and all the time, those happy noises Mulder made when the sex was good, morsels of happiness fed to him mouthful by mouthful.

"Do I ever think?" Skinner prompted, choosing that precise moment to distract Mulder completely, Mulder's zipper sliding down, Skinner's hands sliding in, Mulder's cock so heavy and hot and enthusiastic in his hand.

"Uh, yeah," Mulder said after a while, hips thrusting forward into the tight tunnel of Skinner's





fisted hands. “You ever think about shaving it all off?”

Sudden movement, Mulder pulled forward hard, nearly off balance, Mulder’s mouth pushed against Skinner’s chest. “Shaving off all of what, Fox?”

“Not this,” Mulder mumbled, his mouth round and sucking on Skinner’s nipple, his hands in Skinner’s chest hair. “Not this,” he said again, fingers tangling in the curling hair, making his point, leaving no doubt that he meant what his hands were playing with, not what his mouth was obsessing over. “No, just the hair up top. So you’d be completely naked. In public.” Mulder’s mouth sliding lower, to ribs, to belly button, to groin, belt buckle opened, button undone, zipper lowered, Mulder’s mouth open on soft, warm white cotton, a damp patch showing, there, under Mulder’s mouth, and there, a few inches to the side where the head of Skinner’s hard cock molded the cloth to its seeping dampness.

“Just think, sir,” Mulder said, soft and low, kneeling at Skinner’s feet, looking up at Skinner through downcast lashes, “every time I looked at your naked head, I’d be thinking about the rest of you—” Skinner raising up, pants and briefs pulled down fast by Mulder’s strong hands, hard cock bobbing up into the air, tapping against flat belly, “just as naked,” Skinner’s hands hard as his cock, pressing on the back of Mulder’s head; Mulder stopping speaking, his mouth filled with cock, tongue busy, mouth sucking, and those noises again.

Skinner ran his fingers through Mulder’s thick, soft hair. Slightly too long for the PR image of the FBI, but so perfect, so thick, no thinning, not for Mulder—

Mulder pulling away from his touch, wet mouth no longer sucking him, Skinner’s hand moving Mulder until that soft, thick hair rubbed over Skinner’s cock, and balls, then moving quickly again, Skinner’s cock capturing Mulder’s mouth, then sliding him down again, letting Mulder go, letting Mulder make the choices, hair or mouth, rubbing or sucking, repeating the movements over and over again, until Skinner grabbed him again, and stopped him.

“I want to fuck you,” Skinner said, low and rough. “I’m going to fuck you.”

A surprisingly delicate kiss, almost heartbreakingly sweet. “Good,” Mulder said, his voice rich

and warm as frankincense and myrrh. “You want me to lube up first or you want to just take me?”

It would take the wisdom of Solomon to answer that. “Lubed this first time, but later, I’m going to suck your ass till you’re wet—”

Mulder bucking against him, helpless, the need burning through him, his cock leaving a mark against Skinner’s trouser leg.

“Get the lube, baby,” Skinner said, whispering the words into Mulder’s ear, “get ready for me.”

A few moments, Mulder hopping and stumbling as he pulled his pants off and tried to walk at the same time, and then Mulder was back, his cock stiff in front of him, heavy, swaying with every step.

“No,” Skinner said, as Mulder reached round to lube himself up. “I want to. Come here and turn round. Let me see your ass.”

Small, pale brown, a little hair nestled round it, and that small hole opened up so fast, so hungry, to the slick finger Skinner pressed against it. “Oh, you want me tonight,” he said, sliding the second finger in, thrusting and twisting nice and fast, “you’re hungry for me tonight, baby.”

“That’s ‘cause...” Hissed-in breath, an involuntary buck of Mulder’s hips, such wonderful need. “Oh, fuck—”

“I’m going to,” Skinner said, very cool, although his hand had a fine tremor to it as he thrust three fingers inside Mulder’s ass, Mulder opening wide to him, the supple ease begging for the promise of more fingers, later, tonight, or in the dark hours of the morning. “You were telling me,” a twist of his fingers, Mulder groaning in delight, “why you’re so hungry for me tonight.”

“What I did—what you let me do tonight—”

The head thing? Mulder really was turned on by that—and what he’d *let* Mulder do tonight? An old hunger then, and a deep one, for Mulder to think of it as being something he was ‘let’ do. “You like that?” Skinner asked, not expecting an answer, for he was turning Mulder round, Mulder clambering up, clumsy with haste, to straddle him, Mulder balancing himself right across Skinner’s lap, those long legs trembling as they spread too wide and strained to hold Mulder up. Skinner supported Mulder’s weight again, his own deep hunger fed by this feeling of strength, of power, controlling Mulder as he lowered him slowly, so slowly, while Mulder reached down to feed Skinner’s cock up into his ass. Ass held tightly closed for this moment, descending slowly, hotly, a hard entry, then



consuming Skinner's cock, delivering the sweetest pleasure.

No conversation now, Skinner's mouth busy sucking and biting at Mulder's chest, and Mulder...his ass spread wide on hard cock, his thighs straining, perfect as any Michelangelo, as he raised himself up and pushed himself down, fucking himself on Skinner's cock; his mouth spread wide, open and wet again, making love to naked skin, to Skinner unadorned.

Skinner's hands taking over control of Mulder's hips, moving him in the rhythm and pace that Skinner wanted—that Skinner needed. It didn't last long, no need to make the first one last, the second one, oh, that one they would draw out and make last forever, but this first one was about hunger and need and wiping out the denial of the past two barren weeks.

Wet sounds: wet cock in wet ass, wet mouth on wet skin, sucking mouth on wet nipples. And then: the unique sound, craved for during chill days and solitary nights, the sound Mulder made as orgasm took him, wet splashes on Skinner's chest, the

gasping sighs as Mulder slowly came down from his high. Eyes opening again, Skinner looking into Mulder's eyes, as Mulder yielded everything in the aftermath, moving as and when Skinner wanted him to. Another handful of thrusts, that was all, and then more wetness, inside against the yielding softness encapsulating his cock, the last juddering thrusts liquid poetry, Skinner coming inside Mulder, holding him tight and hard until it was over.

Tenderly now, Mulder still astride him, sitting in his lap; comfortable, soothing touches, soft stroking movements of hands, long, slow kisses that hid nothing.

"So you want me all the way bald?" Skinner asked, his arms full of Mulder.

"God yes."

Waited until Mulder was happily kissing his head again.

"Does that mean you're volunteering to shave me?"

And had his reward when he saw the fire and the need and the hunger in Mulder's eyes.



Skean Dhu

No particular reason for the title, I just like men with hard things tucked away in their clothes! A skean dhu (my preferred spelling out of many options) is a dirk or dagger that's traditionally tucked into the top of the sock when wearing full Highland dress. (Yes, I know it's not a dress—and it's not a skirt either!)

Mulder waited impatiently for the door to open, barreling through before Skinner had a chance to say anything, Mulder's raincoated shoulder bumping into Skinner's terry-covered one as he passed.



"Where's Scully?" Skinner said by way of greeting.

"She was playing touch football," Mulder said, parking himself on the couch, one leg crossing over the other, the foot tapping rapidly.

"Did she break anything?"

"Nothing that was hers. Sprained her right wrist," Mulder said, sounding laconic, his eyes bright with amusement, whether at Scully's escapade or his boss standing there in white toweling robe and half a face of shaving cream, it was hard to say.

"Doing what?" from Skinner, as he started back upstairs. "Specifically."

Mulder paused for a moment, then jumped up from the couch, his coat flapping as he ran up the last of the stairs behind Skinner.

"She straight-armed her brother out of her way."

Skinner's voice muffled through the three-quarters closed door of the bathroom. "That doesn't usually end up with her spraining her wrist."

Mulder paused, barely a breath's worth, just long enough to decide that the mystery of why Skinner was using this bathroom instead of the master bathroom was a personal quirk to be pondered later. He pushed the door open, reacted not at all as a naked Skinner glanced over one shoulder at Mulder standing there, stock still, in the doorway. Showed nothing at all, as Skinner, keeping his back to Mulder, swung his robe back on,



the fabric rustling in the cool silence. Mulder just watched, impassive as stone, as Skinner, now modestly covered, hung up his towel, picked up his razor, and resumed shaving.

Mulder, continuing as if there hadn't been so much as a pause in the conversation at all. "Yeah, but Billy-boy junior was heading full speed for Charlie-boy for a satisfyingly macho display of sibling rivalry," Mulder picked up the book sitting on the top of the toilet tank, "when Scully popped up between them, dumped Billy-boy on his ass," stuttering whisper of pages being rifled through, "evaded Charlie," gentle thunk as the book was discarded, "stole the ball and scored."

"But it was only after the fuss had died down," Skinner spackling in the missing details of Mulder's reports as usual, pausing for a fraction of a second to give Mulder a look and to accept the towel Mulder handed him, "that she realized she'd hurt herself."

Mulder's expression agreed with Skinner, Mulder's fingers busy tapping out a tattoo on the shiny white wall tiles.

"How long before she can hold a gun?"

Mulder shrugged, followed half a pace behind Skinner, eyes taking in everything: the momentary brush of air as Skinner swung round to glance at him, the color of the carpet and walls, the prints on the walls, unusual black and white photographs minimally framed. "A couple of weeks the doctor said, but Scully hit him with her 'as a colleague, doctor,' got him down to a week."

Mulder still right behind Skinner, coming into the bedroom, making no secret of his looking around; at bookshelves, dark blue bedspread, more photographs on the walls, the armoire whose open doors revealed enough electronic equipment to keep Mulder happy for a week.

"Agent Mulder, if you've quite finished with your visual examination of the crime scene?"

Shamefaced, for all of half a second. "Sorry, sir. Anyway, since Scully's out of it, you're stuck with me for the wedding."

Skinner looked at him, head to toe, and turned away. "And I thought taking Scully was going to set tongues wagging."

Behind Skinner's back, Mulder grinned. Wiped that off his face before his boss caught him; before the boss decided that CSM and paranoia be damned, there honestly were plenty of other FBI agents he could trust to watch his back. Nearly

blew it because he just couldn't resist saying: "I could always change into something white and virginal, sir."

"Just don't lisp, Mulder."

Mulder straightened his wrist out too, while he was at it. Picked up another book, read the spine, the blurb on the back, traded that for a small, primitive-looking *objet d'art*. Followed Skinner to the room's other doorway, was stopped by Skinner's arm barring his way.

"Despite last week's letters and this morning's phone call, I don't think there are any assassins lurking in my closet, Mulder."

"Sir." Backing off, standing fidgeting in the middle of Skinner's bedroom while his boss made rustling noises in the walk-in closet.

Mulder had lived in places with smaller bedrooms than that closet, from the glimpse he'd had.

Pondered, for a moment, what Skinner's reaction would be to a closet joke right about now.

Decided it wasn't worth it.

"Sir?" raising his voice, raising a collection of framed photographs, one after the other, from the dark glow of the dresser—older people in color photographs, young people in sepia prints, photos of yesterday's teenagers in '60s colors, photos of '90s teenagers in today's take on '60s colors. The unknown, for Mulder, the truly alien: happy families. "Are you really planning on not telling them why I'm there?"

Slightly muffled reply; excuse enough for Mulder to prowl across the bedroom again towards the closet door, even though he had no trouble hearing Skinner say: "I don't think it's going to make Shelley's day if I tell her there's some psycho threatening to kill her uncle."

Top drawer on the dresser pulled open, white BVDs and undershirts. "Hey, it's her big day, she's already nervous, why not let her know she's walking down the aisle arm in arm with a target?"

"We have already been through this, Mulder," Skinner's voice the blunted chisel of an argument worn old. "I am not missing Shelley's wedding because some lunatic has threatened—"

Mulder, sharp as a honed ax, no argument ever dulled for Mulder. "Not just some lunatic. You put him away for 25 years, sir, and if he knows about the wedding—"

"Then you had better do your job well today, Agent Mulder."

Mulder made a face at the half-closed door.





Hypocrite, he thought at the unseen Skinner. If any one of Skinner's agents had an old collar back out after serving 18 years of a 25-year sentence, and that old collar had immediately disappeared from sight only to start sneaking out detailed and enthusiastic threats on the health and continued existence of the person who'd 'ruined' his life, well, Skinner wouldn't let any one of *them* attend a high-profile wedding, never mind give away the bride, walk down that aisle, stand up there in front of a churchful of people, stand in the receiving line...

Too many opportunities, too many chances for Skinner's own personal psycho to take him out: it didn't matter that the threat probably wasn't immediate, there were simply too many copperplated invitations for this psycho to get at Skinner.

In between muttered invectives about brothers who didn't believe their sister-the-doctor that her wrist was not broken and did not need a damned x-ray, Scully had given Mulder all the details he'd need for today. At least everything was indoors, and the upper pews in the church weren't going to be open, so sighting anyone up there would be warning enough. Everything else, it was going to take someone getting up close and personal. Which meant basically everyone who showed up at the wedding and/or the reception was a suspect, because every guest, every person there would have access to Skinner, uncle of the bride and member of the wedding party, and none of them were personally known to Mulder.

A 'small, intimate affair,' the Keiths called it, and it probably was, by their ostentatious standards, but for Mulder, it was simply three hundred people all told, with only one agent to protect Skinner. It was stupid: regardless of the private security, there should still be a team at least, just because Skinner was too damned macho—

Fingers crossed Skinner's instincts and Mulder's profile were right and Miller would want to toy with Skinner for a while first.

In the meantime... "Sir?"

"What?"

How to put this without getting Skinner's gun rammed down his throat? "Sir, uh, with Scully out of the picture, I know that kind of changes things. Uh... Seriously, how are you going to explain me?"

"Nobody can explain *you*, Mulder. I'm not even going to try."

"So...I'll just...be there."

There was a very speaking silence from the closet.

He knew he shouldn't say anything, but when had that ever stopped him? He was nearly grinning when he said: "People will talk, sir."

"As long as you don't."

"If anyone asks, what should I say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"That takes care of the lisp problem." Mulder grinned again: he'd felt Skinner's familiar chilling glare right through the wall.

He sat on the edge of the bed, bounced experimentally once or twice. Nice. Much better than his couch or his own old mattress. Lay down, looking around this room as it would appear to Skinner every night, murmured in pleasant surprise as the pillow top took his weight, stress slipping from his shoulders as he was cradled in a firm, supporting softness.

He hadn't had much sleep last night, this... Oh, this was *nice*. And smelled good, too, comforter and bedding soft, the pillows firm enough that he bet Skinner slept on his side; Mulder rolled over, onto his left, facing the digital alarm clock, where Skinner would put his glasses as he switched off the lamp. There was a dressy watch Mulder didn't remember ever seeing Skinner actually wear and a book lying open, face downward, small details of another man's private life. On his side like this, the pillow cradled his head not quite comfortably, just that touch higher than his own, chosen for a broader shoulder. So this was how Skinner slept at night, this was Skinner's private night-world—

"Don't say a word, Mulder," from the closet.

Mulder restrained himself from pointing out that he'd understood the instructions first time round, too busy getting himself up out of Skinner's bed before Papa Bear caught him. "I won't, sir."

"I mean right now. And if you laugh, you die."

There was one minor detail Scully had omitted. She'd told him all about Skinner's niece, and Skinner's brother-in-law being dead. She'd told him about Skinner giving the bride away; about the reception, the wedding, the guest list. Told him how Shelley had met her fiancé at the prestigious university which she attended on academic scholarship. Told him the name of the fiancé and the family. Hadn't mentioned that there was more to Shelley becoming one of the Virginia Keiths than just a simple 'I do.'



A formal wedding, Scully had said, hiding a smile, and Mulder had put it down to her envisioning Mulder in formal attire.

Boy, was he wrong.

Skinner walked in, frowning. And swaying. Or rather, his clothes were swaying. His kilt.

Walter S. Skinner, in full Highland formal dress. Dark green and muted...purple? Yes. It was. Purple. Almost indistinguishable against the rich green and under the black crossbars, but definitely purple. So his very own Skinner, in dark kilt, black jacket with silver buttons. White shirt, dark green bow tie. Black, matte leather sporran with silver tassels. White socks, with tartan band round the top, heavy black shoes, and bare knees. Bare naked knees. Big hands adjusting silver cuff links, big hands reaching to adjust the silver-edged pleats at the back of the stylized jacket. Silver-edged black pleats over dark green tartan pleats. Swaying as Skinner walked over to the dresser and picked up his wallet. Swaying as Skinner crossed over to the small reader's table beside the bed, picked up the dress watch.

Mulder slowly sat down, closed his mouth when he realized it was hanging open.

Said not a word. Nothing.

Didn't even comment that Skinner appeared to be blushing.

Refrained, manfully, from making comments about men in skirts. Or windy weather. Came up with not one single sheep joke.

Just sat there, on the edge of Skinner's bed as Skinner strapped on the watch, cufflinks catching the light; sat there and watched as Skinner transferred wallet and ID into the sporran, stuck some sort of decorative knife down the top of one sock, the pleats swaying again as he bent down, the back of his knees and the beginnings of his thighs on display.

Skinner, standing up, paling back to his normal tan, looking at Mulder for the first time. Stopping. Looking at Mulder. The frown deepening, a question stirring, and then Mulder was bouncing to his feet, talking, ushering Skinner ahead of him, getting them both moving, putting as much distance as possible between them and the question Mulder had seen beginning in Skinner's eyes.

Only a few minutes later and they were in the car, heading directly to the church to meet the bride there, Skinner having opted not to put his niece at any risk, no matter how paranoid he thought

Mulder and Scully were being over his taunting stalker. Mulder was driving, had spent several daunting moments resisting the temptation to stare as Skinner mastered getting into a car in what was, after all, a pleated skirt. And now here he was, uncomfortably aware of Skinner sitting, bare-legged, beside him.

This was worse than driving Scully in a short skirt. At least he could tease Scully.

He wasn't going to tease Skinner, not when Skinner had a knife down his sock.

"Are you armed, sir?"

"We've been through that, too."

"But sir—"

"Yes," the heavy sigh of the parent asked 'why' once too often, "I have my gun. Against my own personal wishes."

Maybe 'great!' wasn't the best thing to say when your boss has had to yield to the opinions of his own agents.

They drove in silence, until there was the very distinctive sound of skin on skin, Skinner crossing his legs.

Curiosity killed the cat, and just might kill the agent too. "How do you sit in that without showing..."

Tinge of wry, dry amusement, rescuing him from having to actually name the man's unmentionables. "Damned if I know."

Mulder watched out of the corner of his eye as Skinner uncrossed his legs, pressed the sporran down a bit, obviously decided that wasn't too good an idea. Stopped at a red light, watched as Skinner fidgeted and fussed with the kilt. Quite a change from Skinner's usual cool stillness. Quite a revelation, in more ways than one. And quite dangerously endearing.

Skinner looked up in time to catch Mulder looking at him.

The light changed, Mulder drove on, and the quiet in the car was abruptly uncomfortable, Mulder filling it with too-quick words.

"Are you worried about this guy coming after you, sir?"

Skinner still looking at him, that question back in his eyes. "Not today. The only thing I'm worried about is how the hell I'm going to dance in this thing."

"Dance?" Mulder said, imagination exploding.

"I do have some social skills, Mulder." Dryer than wine, not as chilled. "The first dance at the reception."





Right, the substitute-father of the bride. Swirling round a dance floor.

And Skinner had already caught him looking. Twice.

He had to back down, cool down, not put Skinner in a position of having to notice how his agent was reacting. Better make sure he was really doing his job, scanning the guests for a face he'd only seen in a photograph. Not, he repeated to himself, *not* watching Skinner. Dancing. In a kilt. The pleats swirling and lifting up, to reveal...

Down boy, he reminded himself. We're here to work. We can think about all of this later. Tonight, he promised himself, a long hot shower and no limits on his imagination.

But in the meantime, he had a job to do. Discreetly.

The Victorian wedding-cake of a church, wedged between modern concrete-block Lego office buildings, was blessedly just up ahead, Mulder parking the car as close as he could, a quick touch to Skinner's arm making Skinner roll his eyes, but also behave; waiting in the car like a good protected client while the FBI agent got out and looked around. By the time the passenger door opened onto the wet slash of sidewalk, there was even an opened umbrella ready for Skinner.

Mulder caught the expression on Skinner's face. "Hey, with some of our cases, I figure it won't do any harm to show you I *do* have some FBI skills."

"That's never been in doubt."

It hadn't? Well, well, well.

A press of people, the principal men from both bride and groom's sides all in kilts, although as far as Mulder was concerned, none of them came close to carrying it off the way Skinner did.

And judging by the subtle crowding of women around Skinner, he wasn't the only one who thought that. But a crowd of women was good: the psycho was definitely male, 5'-11", 215 pounds, hard to disguise amidst these powdered and perfumed ladies.

Scanning the people milling around in the mahogany and brass vestibule, Mulder heard a very refined voice ask, "And your...guest is, Walter?"

Mulder turned around, amused. Yeah, your guest is what, Walter? he thought, waiting to see how Skinner was going to handle this. Was disappointed, as Skinner murmured discreetly in Mrs. Keith's left ear.

"Oh, I see," she said, fingering her single understated strand of pearls that could buy several condos with enough left over to decorate them all: one ridiculously supercilious look from her, and anyone would think that Mulder's own carefully chosen, elegant and expensive tuxedo was nothing but dishrags. "I wonder if the ushers have anything more appropriate for him to wear?"

Mulder watched Skinner glancing over at one of the ushers, resplendent in black velvet jacket atop the rich green and muted purple of Keith tartan; Mulder looked away just a fraction too late, his gaze caught lingering on Skinner. "I'm sure he'd be very grateful."

"Grateful my ass," Mulder muttered as he circled unobtrusively around Skinner.

"So long as you keep your pronouns straight," Skinner muttered right back.

Mulder felt his back stiffen; kept his eyes on the crowd, scanning for the face from the mugshot. He didn't look at Skinner: didn't need to. Warning received, loud and clear.

Rejection received, loud and clear.

Stupid to feel this bruised: his own dumbass fault for making Skinner repeat himself. Months ago, Skinner had already made it clear—too clear, according to Mulder's embarrassed memory—that he didn't mess with his subordinates. No matter how willing said subordinates might be.

Okay, okay, he'd get himself back under control, but shit, what did Skinner expect, presenting himself in a completely new manner, a whole new image, concomitant with all the implications of showing a different side of his personality, not to mention the humanizing addition of family, and weddings; psychologically speaking, Mulder's reaction was perfectly normal, standard, even, textbook perfect and—

And Skinner didn't have a degree in psychology. Skinner would only see that his agent, his thoroughly, clearly rejected agent, had taken to ogling him again.

Shit.

Mulder circled round Skinner again, this time at a depth of two people distant. No sign of the psycho. Unless he counted his own reflection in the mirror by the umbrella stand.

Okay. He had hours to get through. Run through the list of what he was going to see, get used to it, be prepared so he wouldn't over-react—hell, so he wouldn't *react*—to Skinner dancing, walking down





the aisle with a bride on his arm, talking to relatives, looking proud...

The crowd was being ushered into the church pews by, appropriately enough, the ushers. And there was no sign of Mrs. Keith nor the velvet jacket. Nor the kilt: naked, under a kilt, beside Skinner....

A flurry of motion, the small side door opening, a blowing confection of white stepping through, heading straight into Skinner's arms.

Double shit. Okay, to the dancing, the bride on his arm and the rest of the get-used-to-it list: add hugging. And smiling.

God, Skinner was smiling, honest to God smiling, white teeth showing, crow's feet crinkling the corners of his eyes, lips curving upwards, big hands just about spanning the bride's back, Skinner's own shoulders wide enough to be seen despite the billowing veil, and the smile...

Mulder wished he'd taken that extra five minutes and jerked off before he'd gone over to Skinner's. Maybe he could grab a bathroom break—

When? Side by side with Skinner when the boss went? Oh, that would be really subtle.

Suck it in, big boy, Mulder told himself, carefully checking the three men who'd come in with the bride, eyes skimming over the older woman: at least until the bride let Skinner go and the older woman inserted herself into Skinner's embrace. Only for a second; the slightly awkward hug of a generation not brought up to be touchy-feely. An unbecoming moment of jealousy sidled into Mulder before shame and recognition set in: the family resemblance was fairly slight, but it was clear enough, in the brown eyes and the dimple in the chin.

Mulder looked away the instant he realized Skinner was observing him as closely as he was observing Skinner and his sister. Damn damn damn. The road to hell, that was for sure, today.

All his good intentions, and he was failing miserably. God help him when Skinner took to the dance floor and that kilt started swinging.

There was nothing hidden behind the flowers on the old mantle, nothing in the umbrella stand, nor on the shelf over the elegant '20s radiators. Nothing but a strawberry-scented bathroom behind the heavy door.

"Mulder?"

Whirling round, peripherally aware that people

were giving him that polite, barely readable 'he's weird' look again. Mulder didn't sigh; it was almost comforting to get his familiar old 'Spooky' reaction and anyway, it was far more comfortable than the expression with which Skinner was currently eviscerating him.

"I'm going to take Shelley down the aisle then stand at the altar with her. Where will you be?"

"Somewhere unobtrusive and discreet," he replied, wished the sharpness in his voice hadn't been so obvious.

"That should be a novel experience for you."

He wanted to say that was uncalled for, but Skinner was surrounded by family. And Skinner had been putting up with his professional indiscretions for several years and his personal indiscretions for nearly as long: it actually was called for. Mulder knew he was hunching his shoulders and slouching again; made himself stand straight and tall, as if he were just fine, thanks.

The organ was swelling, so traditional Mulder winced; was surprised to catch an answering flicker of amusement in Skinner's eyes.

Yeah, the man who hung those photographs and collected those figurines wouldn't be too impressed by the musty trappings of tradition.

Not that that meant they had anything in common, Mulder told himself, vinegar bite of truth, as he slowly kept pace with Skinner, Skinner going down the center aisle, Mulder keeping to the wall on the outside aisle. And even if they did have something in common, it didn't mean Skinner was ever going to change his mind.

Regardless of what "Spooky's" instincts were muttering in the back of his mind: it didn't matter whether or not both he and Skinner wanted Skinner to change his mind. If wishes were horses, his dad used to say, and that remembering brought the old pain gnawing through to join the new.

His dad was fond of commenting on spilt milk, too.

So Mulder straightened his spine, and escaped into the job, and forced himself to be amused that he was, sort of, walking down the aisle with Skinner.

The music had stopped, replaced by the even mustier tradition of a sonorous voice intoning ritualized words as Mulder scanned the assembly; took the back stairs up to check the upper pews; prowled the church as unobtrusively as he could; tried to refrain from making faces at the more egregiously over-religious and over-sentimental moments.





Stood for a moment, very still, and indulged himself—guilt enough for later—in a few seconds of simply watching Skinner as the bride glided up the aisle with her new husband. A few seconds, that’s all, just enough to savor Skinner so relaxed, so very far away from office Skinner, or reprimand Skinner, or I-just-betrayed-you Skinner.

And then it was time to bury all of that again, and get back to the job.

In the car, on the way to the reception, Skinner sitting beside him once again, slightly different this time: Skinner leaning back in the seat, his legs spread, bare knees, the first four inches or so of thigh showing.

Mulder was preternaturally aware that Skinner was naked under that kilt.

There was a traffic snarl up, Mulder trapped in this car with Skinner, and his imagination, and his memory.

Skinner standing there naked, all warm tan and sallow skin, almost even-toned everywhere, the flex and play of muscles as he’d picked up his robe—

Bare back, such broad shoulders, such a deep definition of muscles, the dip of the spine, the slight thickening at the waist that seemed to hit most men after 40, the curved line dividing the firm roundness of his ass, that hand-sized hollow of his flank, the muscles of Skinner’s arms bulging as he shaved, the hair on his chest, his belly, dipping down beneath the small belly-button to the sudden glimpse of pink amidst brown, swinging, like the damn kilt, naked under that damn kilt—

He wasn’t supposed to think about that till tonight, alone, in the shower.

But how could he not think about it, when Skinner was sitting right beside him, naked legs spread. Nothing to contain him, no tight white cotton under there like the suit, just naked, warm flesh, loose and comfortable. Maybe stroked by the woolen kilt, every step Skinner took...

“I wish someone had told me how much this damned thing chafed,” Skinner said out of the blue.

Mulder raised his gaze from Skinner’s lap to meet brown eyes leveled on him.

“Hey,” Mulder said, softly, heart pounding and stomach turning sour with nerves, grabbing at the chance before he had time to come to his senses, “if you don’t want Br’er Rabbit hopping, don’t dangle the carrot right out where he can see it.”

Skinner’s gaze, cooling perceptibly until it was

finally turned towards the outside world they were passing through.

Mulder pushed the accelerator that bit harder, and dug through his pockets for a Peppid.

It was obvious the bride’s family wasn’t footing the bill. The hotel was understated and quietly opulent, the reception hall beautifully decorated and every detail of etiquette had been not only observed, but engraved. In copperplate.

One of the civilian security types—wearing a suit every bit as nice as Mulder’s own beautifully fitted tuxedo—had murmured briefly to Mulder; arrangements to allow for Mulder to take breaks, to have a meal, to let the very circumspect and very, very competent private security cover the gaps for him.

After that little bright shining moment in the car, the thought of food was nearly disastrous and somehow, he didn’t think the Keiths would be too thrilled to have an FBI agent toss his cookies—or his truffles—in the middle of the reception. Carefully polite, Mulder declined, even had the sense to make sure the guy in the Savile Row silk understood it was just that Mulder was under orders, no reflection on ability intended.

At least he’d done one smart thing today.

Damn, but he couldn’t *believe* he’d said something to Skinner.

Dumb. Dumber than dumb. Dumb enough to star in *Wayne’s World 39*. So dumb, they wouldn’t cast him as Ace Ventura’s dumber brother. So dumb...

So dumb, his boss wasn’t looking at him. So dumb, his boss was making the social rounds, Mulder trailing around even more cautiously, smiling and nodding and being the perfect guest, doing everything a highly-trained FBI agent should do. And Skinner wasn’t acknowledging the existence of this miracle.

Monday morning was going to be miserable.

If he survived that long. He still had to get through the reception and then drive Skinner home.

The two of them, alone in the car, and Skinner having had enough time to think of some choice comments.

Mulder glided smoothly between two couples, nodding politely at both, as if they were casual acquaintances. He was passing completely unobserved, just another member of the other side of the





wedding party, someone assumed to be there because he was connected with whichever side was marrying in.

Perfect. For once in his life, he was being perfectly discreet and tactful. And all he was getting from Skinner was...nothing.

Nothing at all.

At least now Mulder knew why the Invisible Man was so fond of bandages.

Time for the meal; Mulder keeping up close to the draped walls, keeping his attention not on Skinner who was, after all, seated and therefore fixed and known, but on the milling waiters, sommeliers, whatever. Anyone up and moving, Mulder watched them. An arm disappearing into a jacket, and Mulder watched them.

Had the horrible thought that there was always silicone and it was amazing what make-up artists could do these days...

Double checked, women as well as men this time. Nada.

Skinner was probably right; still didn't mean they could afford to dismiss the threats, though. In fact, even if everyone else said they could completely ignore the threats, Mulder wouldn't. He'd been inside too many criminal and psychotic minds to dismiss Miller. The letters had been...upsetting in their attention to detail. In their anticipatory greed of what, exactly, Miller wanted to do to Skinner.

No way was Mulder leaving Skinner open to that.

Even if Skinner had been a stranger, some random member of the public to whom Mulder had been assigned. Even if Skinner had just been his supervisory agent. Even then, Mulder wouldn't leave Skinner open to Miller.

Mulder's gaze grazed over Skinner; was caught looking, and dismissed.

The smell of the fish course wasn't helping Mulder's stomach. Wasn't helping one little bit.

But it didn't take much to quell any rebelliousness his stomach might have planned: just think about Skinner's reaction to Mulder making an ass—a disgusting ass—of himself and spoiling Shelley's wedding.

Another waiter, and Mulder watched him, too.

Still nothing.

Good.

This was one of those times he'd happily be proved paranoid.

The meal was over, and the toasts barely begun.

All those years of chewing agents out went completely undisplayed: Skinner's toast to the bride and groom was funny, kind and even touching, judging by the surreptitious wiping away of tears here and there in the room.

To Mulder, Skinner's toast was one long nerve-racking moment with his client standing up right there in front of everyone, unprotected—

Mulder eased his shoulders, the tension barely diminishing, as Skinner sat down. Good; one of the most unsecured events over without incident.

The speechifying went on long enough to remind everyone that various Keiths were in politics as well as business. Gave Mulder enough time to keep a careful watch and still have enough time to sneak a few peeks at Skinner.

The last glass of champagne had been raised, the last toast drunk, and now everyone was moving, herded politely, but herded nonetheless, to the large ballroom. The music struck up, and Skinner led his niece out onto the dance floor.

And Mulder couldn't watch. Too many people around for him to spare more than a glance at Skinner, but he was aware of it, all down his back: Skinner dancing, moving easily, that kilt swinging and swaying and flaring out...

The groom tapping Skinner on the shoulder, Skinner handing over the bride, then swinging his sister out onto the dance floor.

Long enough to see who Skinner was dancing with, not long enough for the image to hit him, Mulder strolling with apparent casualness through the crowd.

A very small, quick nod from one of the private security guys: Mulder decided that was going into his report, even though Skinner had said his professional abilities were never in doubt. Maybe Skinner had never doubted, but everyone else had their Spooky jokes.

Mulder, the psychologist, knew exactly why he was so pathetically grateful for Skinner's crumbs of approval. Mulder the man knew exactly why, too. Just that the reasons were a bit different.

Now was not the time to remember that Skinner had been so careful to make it clear that he did not have sex with his subordinates. Not clear that Skinner was repulsed by Mulder's discreet offer, not clear at all that Skinner was rejecting Mulder *per se*: clear as a bell that Skinner was rejecting a *subordinate*.

It would have been easier if Skinner had gagged



and punched Mulder's lights out for even thinking something so disgusting. At least then it would have been over and done, a closed book. Instead...it was like reading a review of the most enticing book ever, then not being allowed to read it. Look at the dustjacket, but not too much. Don't touch. Never touch. No matter how much he wanted to. No matter how much maybe Skinner wanted to.

The worst part? Skinner was right.

Sheer insanity for them to get involved. Might as well just shoot themselves and save the Bureau and the Consortia the bullets.

Well, no one had ever accused Fox Mulder of being too sane.

Skinner was dancing again, with the groom's mother; Mulder resisted the hunger to stare and kept his attention on the people who were getting close to Skinner, on the people skulking in the shadows over by the large floral display—until he realized it was just a couple having a viciously polite argument.

Made him think of the day Skinner had let him storm into Skinner's office and told him to 'tell the room' why he thought his homicide case was meaningless. Tell the room. As if he were a kid caught passing notes in math class. He'd been furious, absolutely fucking furious with Skinner over that. Furious, and humiliated beyond belief.

But he'd masturbated that night, and other nights, some mornings too, to the image of Skinner standing there, right hand in pants pocket, jacket pulled back revealing shirt and expansive chest, Skinner's coiled power and that anger, and the passion that ran so deep and fast under the stillness.

Fucked his own fist, imagining what it would be like to have all that fire turned towards sex, and to be on the receiving end of Skinner, unleashed.

Even now, the thought made him shiver. He shifted, slipped his hand into his pants pocket to adjust himself unobserved. Wished the night was over already so he could go home and let himself think about what he could see: Skinner, dancing and smiling, kilt flaring, glimpses of bare legs, of that smile, Skinner's hands so big against the smallness of a woman's waist. Skinner escorting his partner back to her table, standing there talking to people, left hand on the back of a chair, right hand searching briefly, automatically, for a pocket that wasn't there.

Mulder checked the opening door; recognized one of the private security types and an aunt from the groom's side. Slid his eyes over the reception hall, allowed himself an extra second to file away the shape of Skinner's ass under the skirt, the way he was standing, leaning down, legs slightly apart, bet he'd be hanging loose and free...

When he'd been a kid, Mulder had once had a serious thumping from Jessica Harper's older brother because he'd been caught lying under the stairs, looking up girls' skirts.

Skinner didn't have an older brother.

Of course, Skinner had a mean right hook himself, but still...

That would make a good fantasy, later. Not Skinner beating him, but himself, finding a way to see under Skinner's kilt and Skinner catching him, not hitting him, but yielding, melting like butter in the heat of Mulder's hunger, the two of them reaching for each other...

Later. Much later, when there would be no one around to see the side effects of his puerile fantasies.

In the meantime, Skinner was making his way round the tables, talking to everyone, at least briefly, doing a great job of playing target to every damned person in the room.

Mulder kept to the perimeter wall, smiled nicely at everyone he passed, nodded pleasantly whenever someone met his eyes. Stiffened, as one man threw an arm around Skinner; tensed, when someone else reached for an inside pocket.

Nothing.

Good.

As long as his profile won out over his paranoia, he'd be happy. Very.

The bouquet had been tossed, Skinner not the one to catch it, Mulder happy to note; the bride and groom left amidst smiles and cheers and best wishes. The dancing went on, and the drinking too, Mulder keeping a tally of just how much Skinner had to drink: if Skinner was slowed down, then that would affect how an...unfortunate...situation would be handled.

Three glasses of champagne for the toasts, two glasses of wine with dinner, and as best he could see, Skinner was still working on his second scotch.

Enough to put Mulder under the table and give him a hangover to remember, but Skinner seemed to be doing fine.





People were leaving now, couples or small, even-numbered groups. Skinner had been the only person alone, the top table quickly rearranged to disguise that detail.

Scully, of course, would have been welcome to sit beside Skinner, to blend in delicately as his guest.

Maybe he should check if the Bureau's health plan covered sex-change ops.

Wouldn't Skinner just love him for the paperwork *that* would engender. So to speak.

The evening was winding down; Skinner coming closer, a single nod indicating Mulder should follow him, and then it was just through the last gauntlet of hugs and farewells, before the chill night air caught in his lungs.

"Sir, if you'll wait here while I get the car—"

"I'll get roped into spending tomorrow with my sister and the new in-laws."

A fate worse than death, no disputing that. Side by side, they headed for the car, Mulder keeping his eyes open, checking out the passing cars and passersby.

"Relax, Mulder. I've told you, Miller won't come near me for weeks. He wants to scare the hell out of me, make me suffer. He's going to hunt me the way I hunted him before he even tries to hit me."

Mulder's own profile of Miller said the same thing, and Skinner knew this man, but paranoia had kept Mulder alive too long to give it up. "Be that as it may, sir, we'll both feel pretty damned stupid if you wake up in the hospital tomorrow with Scully asking us how the hell we managed to get you hurt."

No response to that, although Skinner did stand back and allow Mulder to check the car for any obvious devices, Miller being fond of 'things that go boom! in the night.'

Mulder crouching down, ending up on his hands and knees to check under the car, and a truly inscrutable expression on Skinner's face when Mulder looked up.

On his hands and knees, at Skinner's feet, Skinner looking down at him.

Without meaning to, Mulder licked his lips.

Maybe it was the alcohol loosening Skinner's reins. Maybe it was Mulder's wishful thinking. But there was something in Skinner's expression, a flicker in those eyes, an aborted gesture of the hand.

Then it was: "Get up, Agent Mulder, before you ruin the image of the Bureau."

Stung, Mulder scrambling to his feet, getting right in Skinner's face, his eyes bitterly, painfully honest, daring Skinner to meet him with equal truth. "Afraid I'll remind people too much of our late unlamented director? Sir."

And Skinner backed off. Walter Skinner actually looked away, and took a step back.

It was quite a victory.

Pyrrhic, Mulder muttered under his breath. Just great, he finally scores a major victory and it was pyrrhic to the nth degree.

The blunt clunk of car doors closing; the sharper clunk of seatbelts being fastened.

The whisper of wool, the chink of the buckle that held the sporran slung low over Skinner's hips, the soft shush of naked skin on naked skin: Skinner crossing his legs.

Mulder didn't look.

He could see it, out of the corner of his eye, but he kept his gaze firmly on the road ahead, both hands on the steering wheel, mouth clenched shut before he could say anything else.

Muscles beginning to ache as he waited for Skinner to ream him out but good.

Instead, there was a finger tapping a rhythm on a bare knee, and Skinner staring out the window.

Mulder drove smoothly, wishing that the muscle in his jaw would stop jumping; hard to carry off cool and unconcerned when your knuckles are white and your jaw is jumping. And your breathing is too fast, and you can't help but flicker your gaze at the man sitting beside you. At the way his legs were crossed, all that bare inner thigh nearly revealed, barely hidden by the shadow of the kilt.

Finally, Skinner shifting in his seat, Skinner looking at Mulder.

"Would it be worth the risk?"

Not breathing too fast now: breath hitching, catching on the sudden lump of shock hitting his chest. "I'll call my old lovers up and get them to fill in a scorecard for you." He didn't even need to hear Skinner tell him that's not what was meant, nor look to see that even black humor was too light for this. "Is anything ever worth it?" He shrugged, allowed himself to look at Skinner, allowed himself this, perhaps brief, luxury of not hiding. "I have to believe that some things are."

Went back to driving, to checking drivers, passengers in cabs. Could feel Skinner watching him, could feel the weight of Skinner's thoughts.

Last chance, maybe. Faint heart, and all of that.





“Tell me one thing,” he asked, Skinner giving him an inquiring murmur. “Just tell me if you want me.”

Skinner looking out the window again, the fingers of his right hand tapping again.

The silence lasted several blocks, and Skinner had to actually clear his throat before he spoke.

“Yes.”

Fine way you have of showing it, Mulder thought. “How much? A lot, a little, for ten minutes every Sunday...”

Another one of those silences. Mulder squirmed in his seat, drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. Forced himself to stillness, before Skinner’s tension snapped.

“Enough,” Skinner was saying, reluctantly; a lingering pause, then the words dragged from him. “Enough to make all the good reasons for not doing this feel...just plain stupid.”

Mulder considered hiding behind the pretense of that being another slur against his bedroom skills. “If we were discreet...”

“It’s still no guarantee we wouldn’t get caught. And it still doesn’t get rid of you being my subordinate.”

“So I’m your subordina—”

“Mulder, who the hell does your assessments? Who’s responsible for your job evaluations, for signing off on your cases, your expenses, your travel authorizations? I can’t justify—”

“Bullshit. You’re too goddamned uptight and...and...*fair* to blackmail me or be influenced by fucking me.”

Oh...fuck. He’d said it, he’d just flat-out said it and now, it was...different. Blunt, brutal, lying right there between them.

Skinner’s voice sounding different, hammered by that bluntness. “Is that all it’d be? Fucking?”

“Sure. What else could it be?” And Mulder looked at Skinner with a blandly incomprehending expression he’d stolen from Scully.

Skinner didn’t answer Mulder’s question; repeated his own. “Would it just be fucking?”

Oh, yeah, sir, Mulder thought, I’m going to gush all over you, tell you I think—I’m fucking petrified—that I’m in love with you. As if he’d destroy his one and only chance of getting into Skinner’s bed by messing it up with unwanted emotion. “Yes.” Nice and flat, unequivocal. Perfectly convincing. Just right. Which meant he had to resist the temptation to embroider the flat fact, resist the

temptation to make it more convincing which would, of course, only make it less convincing. The lady—or the FBI agent—doth protest too much.

There was silence for several blocks before there was that tiny movement, that fractional shift in expression Mulder associated with Skinner making a decision, then the deep, cold voice that handed out assignments. “This is what you want? Of your own free will, not to influence me on the job?”

“I’ll have my attorney draw up a contract in the morning, okay?”

Voice hard and harsh and flat. “Is this what you want, Mulder?”

“Yes. And yeah, I know what I’m asking for and I’m over the age of consent in my state and/or country of residence.”

Another pause. “Call in. Have them contact Jeffries at his wife’s birthday party, tell him you’re going to cover security for me overnight, Jeffries owes you one.”

There was a moment, a very brief moment, where Mulder’s mind went blank as the realization hit him, hard. It was going to happen. He was going to bed with Skinner.

Skinner was going to fuck him.

Even if that wasn’t what Skinner had in mind, that was what was going to happen.

Skinner was going to fuck him.

He drove carefully, damping down his nerves, making the call, obeying the traffic laws, and feeling like Cinderella riding in her pumpkin. They were at Skinner’s building now, Mulder using Skinner’s resident’s card to open the security gate, driving sedately to Skinner’s second parking space.

It was going to happen.

The thought, the image, ran through his mind, again and again and again. His movements were careful, cautious, keeping everything under automatic control, while the thoughts spiraled wildly through his head.

Skinner was going to fuck him.

Maybe just once, but hey, he could take hope from the Pringles ad: once you pop, you just can’t stop.

Once they’d done it, once that barrier had finally been breached, how could Skinner argue against it next time?

In the elevator, Mulder finally allowing himself to look at the man he was going home with. Skinner was already staring at him, eyes heavy-lidded, mouth slightly open.





All that fire and passion and intensity, turned towards sex, turned towards Mulder.

Mulder couldn't look away; felt like all kinds of fool, standing there in a public elevator gazing into Skinner's eyes. But he hated to even blink, to lose even that small moment.

Oh, yeah, sure, sir, it's just fucking, nothing more than that.

He was doing just a fine job of proving that.

The elevator pinged; seventeenth floor. Mulder made himself change his expression, made sure it was nothing but lusting, probably even leering. But sex. Nothing but sex.

Caught a glimmer of something in Skinner's eyes. Couldn't place it, was still trying to recognize it as he stepped out into the deserted corridor, checked for anyone else, waved Skinner forward.

Realized what it must've been, when Skinner's hand cupped his ass, a heartbeat's heat, as Skinner passed him.

Outside his own open front door, head cocked slightly, mockingly, to one side, Skinner stood aside to let Mulder do his gently duty.

And again, there was that touch as Mulder stepped forward.

Too brief for his taste, but to have Skinner do that much, in damn near public—never mind there was nobody in sight and no way anybody could sneak up on them, it was still near as spit public—it made the breath catch in the back of Mulder's throat.

"You want me," he whispered as he closed the door, leaning in closer to Skinner, "you really, really want me."

"So get your ass upstairs. I'm too old to do it on the floor or against the wall."

Mulder's saucy expression argued the point, but he kept his mouth shut, went up the stairs, acutely aware of Skinner's gaze on his ass. Even more acutely aware, halfway up, when Skinner's hand landed on his ass and stayed there.

Oh yeah, he wants me, Mulder thought to himself, hugging the heat of that in close, he really, really wants me.

In the bedroom, Skinner sitting on the edge of the bed, very matter-of-fact, emptying sporrán, removing the skean dhu, taking off socks and shoes and jacket.

Like that, huh. Well, he hadn't expected romance or fond declarations of undying adoration. Hadn't even expected to ever get this much. As matter-of-

factly, Mulder stripped off, folding or hanging his clothes across a ladder-backed chair, finding himself unhappily the first one naked. His hands crossed in front of himself, and it was sheer willpower that made him uncover himself, pure pride that made him walk across that room, stark naked down to his soul, under Skinner's flat, uncommunicative stare.

Mulder found a grin, pinned it on, threw himself down on the bed, bouncing a little. "Nice bed, Walter," he said, one hand behind his head, the other ever so nonchalantly rubbing at his lower belly, "you going to try it?"

Silence, for a moment, and Mulder's grin faded. He stared, unabashed, at Walter Skinner standing looking down at him. The broad chest was bare, nipples hidden amidst the curling chest hair, the muscular arms and strong legs were bare. The kilt was still in place, hiding the rest, giving no clue whatsoever as to what lay beneath. As to what condition Skinner was in. Mulder's left hand crept down to his own cock, his palm curving warmly around the thickening hardness, and he stroked himself, once, twice, three times, his thumb caressing the head of his cock. Shameless. Or at least a good facsimile thereof.

Mulder watched Skinner's attention focus on what Mulder was doing with his hand; watched, breath catching again, as Skinner licked his lips.

God, if Skinner went down on him...

The world would end or it'd be declared a miracle. Get with the program, he told himself. Take what you can get, before he changes his mind.

They could work up to the reciprocal stuff later.

There was an edge to Skinner's expression, an edge Mulder didn't like at all: coherent, logical thought was the last thing he wanted Skinner experiencing right now. So he spread his legs, slid his fingers lower, down between his cheeks, rubbing himself there.

That was better.

Skinner's hands were just slightly unsteady as he undid buckles and belts, the kilt sliding from him, falling heavily to the floor.

Mulder looked at him. At the size and the weight of him, at the length of him, at the way his cock was more than half-hard, at the way the muscles of the thighs were so clearly delineated, at the way the hair stopped at the top of those thighs, smooth, clear skin on hips, leading into the lower





stomach, then more hair there, blending into the thick hair curling round cock and balls.

“My, what a big cock you have,” Mulder said.

“All the better to fuck you with,” Skinner replied, and climbed onto the bed, stopping kneeling astride over Mulder. “Is that what you want?”

“No, I thought we’d play strip Scrabble,” more than a little irritated: just because he sometimes played the brat in the office did not mean he was a kid too stupid to know what he wanted and what he was getting into. What Skinner was getting into.

Yeah, well, Skinner was no fool: sure Skinner knew that. But Skinner had also caught him staring more than once. Skinner had also put up with Mulder making what just might have been cow eyes at him. For months. Shit. He grabbed Skinner’s hand, brought it between his legs, spread himself as open as he could. “I want you to fuck me, okay? And when you wake up in the morning, I won’t be hanging the fucking curtains and I won’t be calling Tiffany’s to view partnership rings. It’s just fucking, okay? And it’s what I want.”

Skinner’s hand stroking him there, probing him, big, blunt fingers pressing against him. “You got condoms?”

Nearly snapped, why, you scared of catching something? But caught himself in time: it wasn’t Skinner’s fault, no reason to ruin everything by being mad at something Skinner couldn’t help. You loved someone or you didn’t. Why should Skinner feel any differently from anybody else?

“In my wallet,” he said, very mildly, getting a look for that. “You got lube?”

Oh, they were so mature, so calm, so very prosaic. “Sure,” Skinner said. “In there.”

Oh, yeah, calm, mature, prosaic. So how come Skinner couldn’t meet his gaze and how come he was feeling like a nervous kid facing his first time?

Skinner left him on that bed, gave him a terrific rear view. Better than the brief glimpse in the bathroom earlier. Much better.

But even watching Skinner take the liberty of going through his pockets, Skinner standing there naked in the lamplight, wasn’t enough to distract his brain from providing unwelcome answers.

Skinner couldn’t meet his gaze because Skinner didn’t want to see what Mulder knew was probably right there in his eyes. And he was nervous because he wanted more than Skinner was offering, and couldn’t ask for more, because that would put an end to this right now.

And because he couldn’t remember the last time he’d...done this. A long time since he’d last had sex. And all the way back to Phoebe since he’d...

He wasn’t going to think the L-word.

Fucking, he reminded himself, watching Skinner coming back to the bed. Just plain, old-fashioned fucking, he thought, hunger hollowing him as he stared at Skinner, at the body that would be on him, in him, soon.

Nothing more. Don’t even think about it being anything more.

Not till tomorrow, when he’d be alone, and could risk a dream.

Calm, and mature and prosaic. Skinner told him, “Lift up,” and pulled the comforter out of the way, all the way down to the bottom of the bed.

The mattress barely dipped as Skinner got into bed.

The soft click of Skinner’s glasses being put down, and then a moment, quite horribly awkward, as they lay side by side for a second, but then Skinner was leaning over him, touching him, exploring Mulder’s body with a free hand and casual ownership.

It shouldn’t feel this good. The *who* of it shouldn’t make such a difference to the *what* of it. But it did. Oh, God, but it did.

His cock raised itself up, weeping eye blindly seeking touch, and Mulder heard himself groan as Skinner took him, and stroked him. His balls were drawing up close already, and he knew a moment’s panic that he’d ruin this like an over-wrought teenager, but Skinner let him go, rubbed great, soothing circles on his chest, and belly. Kissed his nipples, sucked them, bit them gently, licked them.

Deep voice, deep against his chest. “Feel free to join in any time, Mulder.”

“Sorry,” he muttered, and put his hand on Skinner’s chest, fingers sliding through hair to find nipples, to roll and pinch until there were two hard buds pressing against Mulder’s palms, and then, one after the other, against Mulder’s tongue.

Oh, fuck, the man even *tasted* good.

Mulder pushed, and Skinner allowed it, Mulder touching and kissing, mouthing and caressing everything: the sharp point of a shoulder, the long sweep of a collar bone, the soft hair covering a firm pec, the ripple of stomach, the delicate smoothness of side, the heady contrast of silken skin over hard cock.

Oh, fuck, the man *really* tasted good.





And that noise, addictive, completely addictive, he'd sell his soul to hear Skinner making that noise again.

So he sucked, harder, and licked from base to tip and back again, and took the fullness of balls into his mouth and tongued those, and listened to the noises Skinner made. Small, controlled noises from anyone else, but from Skinner, these were a cacophony of need.

Skinner needed him. Just for right now, just for this, but Skinner needed him. Wanted him. Desired him.

It was enough.

Mulder took Skinner's cock into his mouth, tongue along the undershaft, and reached down to his own cock.

"No."

Skinner, withdrawing from him, Skinner pulling him up towards the head of the bed, arranging him just so.

"Not until I'm inside you."

The words went straight to his cock.

"Not until," the sound made Mulder shiver: foil, tearing, latex, sliding, "I'm inside you, fucking you."

"Then fuck me. I want it, come on, fuck me—"

Breaking off, words crumpling into a gasp, as a slick finger stabbed home. Right inside him, so wet, so slick, so easy.

"You don't have to go easy, c'mon, just fuck me—"

Saw the question in Skinner's eyes. Chose not to answer it. Let him think there were other men, or inventive women. Let him think that, better than the pathetic truth.

Opening fast, his body slippery inside now, Skinner kneeling between his legs, lifting his legs up, opening him wide, all the way, his cock hard and hot against his belly, and Skinner's cock hard and hot against his ass.

Hard, and hot, in his ass.

In him.

Inside him.

All the way.

Mulder heard himself groan, heard Skinner echo him, realized he'd closed his eyes, hoarding this memory for later.

There was the feeling of being filled, of not being alone, of not being separate. Of being touched, more intimate than anything else could be. The prickle of pubic hair against his balls, and the

caress of balls against his ass. The softness of hair against the backs of his thighs, where he was pressed against Skinner's chest; the pull and the stretch of his muscles, as he was bent in half by Skinner's body, as he was spread open by Skinner's cock inside.

Breath, against his face, sounds against his ears, smooth skin and flexing muscles beneath his hands as he held Skinner in close. Closer. Wanted him closer.

Wanted him deeper.

Mulder lifted his hips, and Skinner pushed into him; withdrew, only a couple of inches, and pushed in again. Stayed inside him, rocked against him, getting in that fraction deeper, stroking him inside just that little bit. Trapping Mulder's cock between their bellies, smooth skin stroking on one side, damp curling hair stroking along the other.

Then Skinner pulled out almost all the way, far enough that the thick ridge of cockhead stretched Mulder, and then that blunt thickness was pushed all the way back inside.

Mulder opened his eyes.

And Mulder caught Skinner looking.

Then everything was blurring, Skinner coming in closer, and something Mulder hadn't really expected: Skinner was kissing him, and it stole the breath from him. He murmured, grabbed Skinner tighter, his arms straining, struggling until he could wrap his legs round Skinner, tight, so tight, Skinner still inside him, and Skinner still kissing him.

He'd wanted this, enough that he'd never admitted to himself that he wanted it. It was still only fucking, only a fool would expect more, but this wasn't a convenience for Skinner, an uncommonly safe outlet for a desire it was risky to indulge. This was...more. Personal, one step onwards from just fucking.

This was hope.

Frightening, exhilarating, exciting: hope.

Mulder kissed back while holding Skinner tight and hard, letting go only enough for Skinner to draw back and fuck him, trying to slow this down, make it last, make it better—make it good enough that Skinner would come back for more.

Make it good enough that one day—one night—it just might be more than fucking, and the indulgence of kissing.

In your dreams, he told himself, making himself concentrate instead on how good it was to play his tongue against Skinner's; how the pleasure





warmed through him as he slid his tongue inside Skinner's mouth; traced lips, teeth, tongue again, so wet, so warm, so slippery smooth, such a fine, fierce pleasure.

But then the heat rose in his chest, his skin flushing red, the heat prickling him, just as Skinner's chest hair prickled his chest and nipples. Heat deep inside, hardness, rhythm rubbing him just right, and the flawless *frisson* against his cock.

He was on the verge, one more stroke, one more thrust, and he'd come; too late to do anything about it, too impossible to delay it; time to do nothing other than surrender to it, and to Skinner.

He lost himself in it, drowned in the quintessence of everything happening to him right now.

And through that, Skinner didn't stop, didn't slow, kept on making it good.

No more kisses; only Skinner taking his own pleasure, making dark, dirty noises, sweat beading him, and Mulder watching, watching, unseen now, free to watch as much as he wanted as Skinner came.

Heaviness on him, for a second, and then fumbling, awkwardness, Skinner hesitating for a moment, looking around for where to put the condom.

So much for romance.

"Oh God," Skinner said, and Mulder watched him shift up and sit on the edge of the bed, watched, unflinching, as Skinner didn't look at him. "What the fuck have I done?"

"Nothing that anyone's going to find out about," Mulder told him, reaching out to stroke his hand down Skinner's back, stopping as Skinner's muscles shivered. "Who would I tell? My mom?"

"Scully."

No. Never her. Not about this, not ever about this. "I'll be sure to mention it as we chat over her next autopsy. Or maybe," since Skinner didn't seem too reassured, time for some scraps of truth, "I'll just wait till she's lying there throwing up from her latest round of chemotherapy."

And let Skinner make of that what he would.

With any luck, Skinner would think that all those rumors about "Mrs. Spooky" were true after all. Maybe it would help convince Skinner that Skinner had simply misunderstood, had simply misread anything other than impure lust in his least-favorite agent's eyes.

Skinner still sat there, head bowed, shoulders slumped.

"Come on, it's not the end of the fucking world! So you fucked a man, so what? It doesn't make you J. Edgar. Sir."

Still not looking at him.

Skinner's hand less than steady as it ran over the sweat-damp skin of his head. "I'm going to shower."

And Mulder heard the unspoken: get out of my bed by the time I get back.

Probably wanted him out of the condo—the entire building, the fucking Bureau too.

But Mulder had called in already. He was stuck here. They were both stuck here.

Skinner picked his glasses up; put them on one handed; got to his feet. Saying nothing. Not looking at Mulder. Behaving like a man alone.

Beggar at a banquet, Mulder watched Skinner leave the room; watched the play of muscles, memorized the color of the skin, remembered what it felt like to be covered by that body, to hold those broad shoulders hard and tight.

What it was like to have Skinner inside him.

Looked like he'd have to go on memories and his own right hand for a while.

At the doorway, Skinner hesitating, glancing over at Mulder, the movement too brief for Mulder to see beyond the darkening, familiar frown.

The sound of water running, a door closing, and a lock snicking shut.

Mulder looked at the clock.

Hours to go.

Hours and hours and hours.

Wearily, he got up, dressed, and remade the bed.

Until it looked as if nothing, nothing at all, had happened.



Post-Redux II

Set after Redux II (obviously!); where else did Mulder have to go? To whom could he turn? How could he not respond to Skinner's overtures during the Reduces? Well, fairly easily, I suppose, in X-Filesland, but in Slashdom, is there any doubt?



Carefully, Mulder put the phone back in place. Edged a bookend closer to the leather bound books. Ran a finger over the gilt names on the spines.

"Mulder?"

"She's fine," he said, polishing his best smile, pinning it on. "Her mom says she's real happy to be home."

"Home?" Skinner's voice coming closer; Mulder's smile becoming strained. "Scully's already home? When was she discharged?"

Mulder shrugged, perfectly nonchalantly. "Some time today."

Repeated back at him. "Some time today." Flat, dull, monotone covering a deep vibration in the voice: rare, to hear Skinner so furious.

"Yeah, that's what her mom says."

There was the barest hint of a tremble in Mulder's fingers as he ran them over the speed dial buttons on Skinner's phone.

Nothing was said: nothing needed to be said. Mulder could hear it all in his own mind, could even put it in Skinner's tone of voice.

Skinner's voice was a perfect match: "When were they planning on telling you?"

Another nonchalant shrug, not that Mulder really thought he was fooling anyone. But the motions had to be gone through, the proprieties observed. As well as they could be, given that he'd shown up on Skinner's doorstep at half past eleven on a Sunday night.

Mulder didn't permit himself a sigh, but thank God Skinner was letting it drop. "It's late," Mulder said, finally giving himself a brief glance at Skinner. "I guess I should go."

But he didn't get up from the desk chair. Wasn't asked to.



At the back of his head, the barest touch, the merest breath of motion, as if fingers had skimmed over his hair.

“Does Scully’s mother have any idea what you—”

Sharp movement, Mulder pushing a notepad out of the way, Skinner’s house keys skittering noisily across the desk. “I didn’t do anything, all I did was—”

Barely whispered. From behind him, from above him, the awareness of someone standing so closely at his back. “All you did—” Skinner’s voice running dry; slight cough; continuing, hand on the back of the desk chair, fingers against the back of Mulder’s shirt, “all you did was risk everything. You were willing to pay everything for that cure—”

“Who says it was my cure? Mrs. Scully is lauding the prayers of their priest, she’s talking about her Dana coming back to the flock—”

A very, very rude word said behind him, and this time, there was no mistaking it: a touch to his hair, sliding down to press comfortingly at the back of his neck.

“You did it, Mulder.”

A twist of pain to his smile; a twist of pain to his heart. “That’s what the Scullys think.”

And bless him: Skinner didn’t need it spelled out.

“Then they’re wrong. Your only involvement in Scully’s cancer was finding a cure for her.”

“Yeah?”

One hand on each of his shoulders, firm squeeze, the hands staying there longer than the proprieties allowed. Low-breathed word, long, drawn out. Utterly certain. “Yeah.”

Mulder leaned back, excessively aware that this was Skinner’s chair, at Skinner’s desk, in Skinner’s condo. That the place smelled of Skinner; felt like Skinner. So bland on the surface, but every detail an intriguing contradiction.

Looking up into the pale gold reflection of desk lamp on glasses, Mulder bleakly honest: “She thinks you’re the mole.”

A snort of actual honest-to-goodness laughter. “And what do you think?”

That he’d risked it all, sold his soul, for nothing. Worse: found that his soul wasn’t considered worth buying. Worse yet: thought of Scully going home, and no one telling him. Of her not trusting Skinner, whom she knew he did trust. Of her embracing her science, and her religion, and believing he believed just a lie. “It isn’t you.”

“Glad that knowledge makes you so cheerful.”

“I was just thinking.”

Another squeeze from the hands on his shoulders, then the right hand was stroking, soothingly, now. “About?”

“About Scully. Her family and her priest being so sure.”

The left hand touched his hair again, and this time, fingers darted briefly through the strands, kissing his scalp.

“Tell me,” and Skinner’s voice had returned to the dark monotone, “what do you get from this woman to put up with this shit?”

Ready to bolt from the chair, getting nowhere, Skinner’s hands grabbing him, pushing him back down. “It’s a legitimate question, Mulder.”

“No,” twisting against the hands holding him, “it’s a cheap dirty fucking question—”

“Are you?”

Stillness.

“Fucking?”

The hands touching him, holding him. Strength, containing him.

Deep breath. Scully going home, and no one telling him. No. Face it. Scully going home, and Scully not telling him. “No,” he said, and the hands gentled on him. “We came close a couple of times, but...no.”

“Then what,” another of those brief caresses to his hair, “do you get from her that makes it worth it?”

“Truth,” he said, surprising himself with that very thing. “I don’t care if I hate it, at least it’s the truth. And loyalty—she sticks up for me when she thinks I don’t know. And questions, she always questions, she makes me think.”

Another waiting silence. But the rest of the truths weren’t ready to come out.

Skinner still waited. Still held him, steadied him, with just the touch of his hands.

“I got an offer,” Mulder told him.

“Of what and from whom?”

“Your friend Smokey.”

“Don’t call him my—”

“It’s okay,” his own right hand touching Skinner’s. “I know. Anyway, the black-lunged bastard offered me a job.”

“He—what?”

“A job. Said I could stay with the Bureau, or go work for him—follow in his footsteps, make him proud and my mom happy.”





“Should I take this as your official resignation, Agent Mulder?”

Reaching up, to pull Skinner’s hands back to where they had been so warm. “I don’t care if he donated the sperm, he’s not my father.” Pause, to stroke the backs of Skinner’s hands, the wrists, up under the cuffs of the familiar office shirt. “Even if it is tempting.”

“To have him as your father?”

Looking down. Dark brown desk. Dark gray pants. Black belt. The edge of his shirt and the tail of his tie. “To have someone want me. Approve of me.”

There was a very long silence, although it was entirely possible it only lasted seconds. “You don’t have to go to him for that, and you don’t have to wait for Scully.”

Mulder listened to the words; let them slide into him. Felt them, sinking into him, settling deeper. Felt his body stir, erection growing, rationality beginning the losing battle.

Hands, sliding up his arms. Across his shoulders. Down his chest. Palms, pressing, just so, on the slight shadows that revealed his nipples. Voice, so deep, so warm, so dark—and under the confidence, the tremor of nervousness, the chill of fear. “Mulder? What do you think?”

Mulder tipped back as far as the ergonomically designed back support would let him. Looked up at Skinner looking down at him. “I think,” he said, his words very careful even while his mind gibbered at him for his recklessness, “I think you want to seduce me.”

“And what do you think of that?”

“I think it’s a stroke of genius.”

A stroke, down his chest, Skinner so big, leaning over him, and a stroke across his groin.

The chair swung round, slowly, and Skinner crouched down, slowly. A small frown between his eyebrows, as he studied Mulder. And then: reaching to take his glasses off, Mulder beating him to it,

their hands touching, warm, small clumsinesses as they took Skinner’s glasses off and left them on the desk.

Mulder, holding his breath, lips parting, as Skinner leaned in. Closer. Closer. Touching. Lip to lip, tongue on tongue, tongue slipping inside his mouth, so wet, so strong, tasting him, touching him, exploring him, knowing him. Hands, one cradling his face, the other, folded, the backs of knuckles caressing so gently under his chin.

Skinner, spreading Mulder’s legs, coming in between them, hands sliding over thighs round to the small of Mulder’s back, pulling him forward, closer, Skinner shifting awkwardly until he was kneeling between Mulder’s widespread legs. Skinner edging forward until they were pressing groin to groin, gasp of breath, reaction, and then Skinner’s hands sliding down again, to touch, to press, to mold the shape of cock against inner thigh.

Whisper against the side of his neck, small bite to the lobe of his ear: “Since this is a seduction, I guess I better get you upstairs and into my bed.”

Trace of stubble under his open mouth, Skinner’s mouth opening willingly to let him in. “Here’s fine.”

“Bed.”

“No—”

Hauled to his feet, pulled in hard, arms hugging him, body pressing against him. “Bed. I’m not fucking you across my desk. Maybe next time.”

Fucking him. And next time.

“Wouldn’t want you to put your back out,” Mulder said, and smiled, the swat on his ass pressing him hard against Skinner’s cock.

“I’m going to take you upstairs,” another swat to his ass, and then he was being steered, firmly, up the stairs, “and I’m going to teach you,” along a corridor, “a thing or two about age,” literally lifted off his feet and tossed onto the bed, “and stamina.” And by morning, Mulder had learned a thing or two. Or three.



Teal Dreams

What can I say? This was inspired by emailing with friends, and an appreciation of teal, and silk, and certain lush, buff, muscular rumps—but since it’s set somewhere in fourth season, when Mulder’s motto could well have been “life’s a bitch and then you die,” it’s not quite as fluffy as I tend to think of it. But it is romantic, and it has as happy an ending as can be expected.

Too many years in too many jungles—concrete, political and other—had trained him: the first tap on his door, and he was reaching for glasses, gun, light, up out of bed before his brain was fully awake. He shivered a little in the comparative cold, the silk of his pajama bottoms clinging to him with scant heat.



Even though it had been weeks, there was no doubt, now that he was awake enough to register the too-familiar knock. Mulder, he thought, half annoyed, half interested; two AM on a Thursday night, it had to be Mulder at his door.

He nearly reached for his robe. Nearly. Sucked his belly in instead, looking down at himself, at the way the teal silk rippled and caressed its way over him as he breathed in hard.

No. No robe. Everything had changed with the arson of the basement office and the closing of The Files. So let Mulder put up or shut up, finally.

Pulling the front door open, the corridor light too bright, eyes narrowing against it.

“Shit—sorry, I wasn’t thinking, I’ll come back in the morning—”

Skinner stepped aside, looked at him.

Something vaguely resembling a smile, embarrassment and confusion and a damn near combustible flicker of gaze grazing down his body, then Mulder’s bland office mask was firmly back in place, and Mulder was stepping forward, all diffidence and arrogance, oil mixing with water.

Unique, Skinner thought, as always. And as always: Thank God for that. “Drink?”

Unexpected, that offer, after so many nocturnal visits conducted as near office meetings. Mulder blinked at him, in that slow, measured way he sometimes had amidst the coiled energy. “You keep good scotch around?”



Skinner girded in the urge to laugh at Mulder's poor-man's Mickey Spillane. "Is there a bad scotch?"

Old joke, but not the old smile.

Haunted eyes, reminding Skinner of other haunted times of his own.

And then he realized, and damned himself for his stupidity. Mulder was a grown man now, but still, it wouldn't get him what he wanted if he reminded Mulder of his father's bane. Skinner put the whiskey bottle back, went into the kitchen, came back with orange juice, ice clinking. Mulder standing where he'd left him, shadowed hazel eyes following Skinner's movement. A nod, from Skinner, and then Mulder took off his coat and sat down.

No jacket under the coat.

And no gun.

A sudden Burroughs-ish image of typewriters and paper, the usual result of Mulder losing a gun.

Skinner looked at where Mulder's gun should be.

Long fingers skimming navy blue wool, white shirt crimpling as Mulder shrugged. "Locked in the bottom drawer in my office." Not a pleasant smile. "Sorry. My *cubicle*."

Skinner drank some orange juice; wished he'd thought to take the vodka into the kitchen first.

Silence, while Skinner sat there drinking plain juice, gnawing at the differences in Mulder, and Mulder sat there swirling ice through orange, thinking God alone knew what.

Two thirty.

Two thirty-five.

Nothing said.

Two forty.

He wasn't Mulder's direct supervisor, not any more.

The Bureau was an equal opportunity employer. Technically speaking, anyway.

Two forty-five.

And this place had been swept by the Lone Gunmen themselves not ten hours ago.

So why the fuck was he sitting here like a maiden aunt?

Because... Because he was big and strong, and he'd sworn he'd never, ever take advantage. Of anyone. And God help him, never mind what his cock was yelling, his brain was telling him he'd be taking advantage if he pushed it tonight, if he didn't wait till Mulder asked, if he grabbed Mulder in this state—hell, Mulder was so fractured he'd

probably let the cigarette smoking bastard fuck him if there was even a pretense of affection involved.

Mulder swirled his glass, the rounded, half-melted edges of the ice barely clinking now.

No cases to discuss, no disasters to mitigate, just...silence.

And every other night, at this point, Mulder would open his mouth and say, I guess I should leave. And Skinner would say nothing, and let him leave.

Every single non-fucking time.

Mulder opened his mouth, and Skinner readied his reply.

"Can I stay?"

"No—" What the fuck? "Yes. Yes, you can stay."

Mulder looking at him, not believing, misery shifting to anger as the assumption of pity took root.

Skinner shrugged, got rid of Mulder's glass. "Habit. You usually say 'I guess I should leave'."

Watching Mulder consider that. Watching the decision being made: truth, lie, or doesn't fucking matter.

Finding himself damn near praying that Mulder would choose, tonight. That's all he needed, for Mulder to choose, this once—

Mulder, leaning closer, mouth touching his, tongue touching his lips, hand touching his chest. Yes.

At last.

"About fucking time," he growled, both hands snaring Mulder's head, holding him firm, keeping him in place as Skinner kissed him, tongue lashing into Mulder's mouth, offering no pity, only hunger. And need. And a long time waiting.

A groan bled into him, and the heat from Mulder's hands bled into him. He withdrew, and nodded, towards the stairs. Was aware of Mulder following him, of Mulder's gaze on his ass—imagined how his ass looked through the sueded softness of the teal silk. Wondered how the silk felt to Mulder, as it slid between palm and ass.

The pallid light from his bedroom added shadows to the hall, and he reached behind, taking Mulder's hand, mocking himself even as he walked hand-in-hand.

For Mulder's comfort, that was his excuse, and he was sticking to it.

He lay down on the bed, used his feet to push the comforter down out of the way, spread himself out on midnight blue sheets pulled taut the way





he'd learned to like, a lifetime ago. Spread his legs, watched as Mulder watched him, as Mulder licked his lips as the teal silk lapped across his groin, shadows pooling and lamplight outlining, the different shades mapping his desire.

"Come here," he said, and Mulder obeyed at once, crawling up onto the bed, mouth going where it was wanted, teal silk darkening and clinging as Mulder sucked him through the cloth.

Revealed, now, his entire length, and the curved weight of his balls beneath, wet silk lingering like a good-bye kiss.

"Take your clothes off," he said, and again, Mulder obeyed, rising from the bed to stand there, taking his clothes off, neither drama nor display, until he stood there, unadorned, laid bare.

"What do you need?" Skinner asked.

"You," Mulder lied.

"Not good enough. What do you need?"

The truth revealed, abrupt as a gun being drawn, chaos storming in Mulder's eyes. "I don't know. I don't fucking know! But you—you're part of it."

Skinner took his glasses off, and spread his arms wide. "Then come here," he said, offering what little he could.

Naked body in his arms, naked eyes meeting his, Mulder sinking down onto him, sinking into his arms, allowing himself to be held. Skinner stroked Mulder's back, and ass, and hair; rubbed himself against Mulder, against the answering flare of desire. It wasn't going to take long, this first time: Skinner abandoned all fantastical notions of taking their time, of making it "special." Not what was needed, not now. He stroked Mulder's hunger, fingered his ass, dipped a fingertip inside the too-tight heat. Hissed intake of breath, and words kissed wetly against his neck: yes, do it, fuck me...

Hips thrusting down against his, mouth licking and biting at his neck, hands twisting his nipples, cock rubbing fiercely against his own. Oh, he'd fuck Mulder all right, but no way were they going to take the time for that right now; no way was he going to indulge himself by taking advantage of Mulder's unthinking need. He rolled Mulder over, and didn't miss the shift in Mulder's body language, the limpid relaxation into submission, the luminous consent in Mulder's eyes.

Hard and fast, this first time, his hands tangling with Mulder's in the silk, until Mulder's hands were on newly bared skin, threading through warm

curls, pressing up under the rising tightness of his balls. He thrust, then, the head of his cock raking the underside of Mulder's, slicking them both, sliding them together, better than any stroke of any hand, the perfect fluidity of soft skin caressing their hard cocks together.

Mulder's mouth was open in a gasp, or a groan, Skinner didn't care which; he filled that mouth with his own tongue, his own gasp, and groan. Kissed Mulder, and kept on kissing him; biting on that lower lip—God, how long had he famined for this?—licking it, biting it again; rubbing his face against Mulder's, feeling the rasp and burn of unshaven cheek against his own, his mind catching fire at the sudden image of that cheek rubbing against his own ass cheeks, Mulder's tongue deep inside his ass. Thrust hard, then, and wrapped Mulder tightly in his arms, hugging him so hard, he could feel Mulder's nipples catching against his own.

Under him, he could feel Mulder's balls move, whispering against his own, and then—there, just there—at the base of his cock, until all he could do was thrust again, and again, until Mulder stiffened, back bowing, mouth opening under his own again, his tongue fucking that mouth, again and again and again, a single promissory note of the real fucking Mulder would get next time.

So slick, so perfectly wet and slick, hot, viscid, better than anything money could buy, Mulder's semen making it all so perfect, until he turned mindless with pleasure, and he thrust, and stroked, and thrust and...

Mulder holding him, now, long-fingered hands gentling up and down his spine, sliding round to his sides, following the interstitial rhythms of his ribs. Nearly ticklish, nearly arousing, the perfect ebbing touch after the perfect orgasm.

After a moment, or ten, he rolled onto his side, and then his back, pulling Mulder with him, arranging them in comfort just in time for sleep's descent.

He woke up knowing. Last night—earlier this morning—he'd fucked Fox Mulder. Had abandoned his protective inhibitions, and gone from simply rubbing off against each other to fucking Mulder, Mulder clinging tightly to him; those whimpering, shuddering sighs, memories etched now in every nerve in his body.

The alarm bleated, and he thumped it. The usual





routine dragged out in front of him, and he contemplated it as he stood at the toilet. It seemed, this morning, the appropriate place to consider the restraints and constraints of a lifetime of old-fashioned Protestant Work Ethic.

His decision was downstairs; either by dint of absence, or lure of presence.

There, by the sliding glass doors, Mulder looking down at the world, at the lives, blinded, blinkered, unknowing lives, scurrying around like so many ants in a pesticide factory.

Mulder not looking at him, shoulders so tense and pale above the borrowed silk. Too loose, on those slim hips, the teal pleating into shadows and light, curving sweetly over the scant swell of ass, the sharp line down the center leading up to the dimpled small of the back, thence to the sweeping line of the spine cradled by the swath of muscles, the story of last night punctuated by finger-shaped bruises and notated by scratches.

"I know what I want," Mulder said, hoarse and hollow.

Skinner walked closer.

"I want to stop." Pause, as if waiting for the usual platitudes and buck-you-up encouragement. Voice slipping softly into the silence. "I don't want to fight them any more. I don't want to clean up the office, get Scully her own damned desk down there—I don't even want her down there, I want her upstairs, with the real agents, having a real career, a future. I want..."

Skinner came closer, listening to the words, seeing the truth clenched in Mulder's back.

"I want to admit defeat. They beat me. They destroyed everything, they gave me Samantha just so I'd know she doesn't want me, they took Scully."

Touching Mulder's back now, hands moving up to curl over the tips of shoulders, stepping closer until the hair on his chest touched Mulder's skin.

"She's not the same anymore. She..." Deep breath, audible swallow, Mulder leaning back into Skinner's strength. "She hates me now. Or maybe not hate, maybe just...contempt. As if she loves me because her fucking God says I'm the cross she has to bear."

Mulder's skin so soft under his lips, the delicate nape fuzzed with fine hair and the salt of sweat, from last night.

Mulder's voice dropping not to a whisper, but to a husky murmur that vibrated through Mulder's back, into Skinner's chest, contrapuntal to his heartbeat.

"They used me. They played me for a fool and I fell for it, I *wanted* to fall for it. 'I want to believe,'" sneer cutting at Skinner's ears. "I stuffed an apple in my mouth and served myself up on a silver fucking platter."

Not his place to talk Mulder round; not his place, not his decision, he reminded himself, nipping Mulder's shoulder to keep his own words stoppered.

"I don't want to try again. Try again for what? To get what I always get, a fistful of smoke and a bellyful of failure? They *won*. Why can't I just admit that, why can't I just let them win? Who could blame me for giving in?"

Any number of people, but it was Mulder's life. Mulder's choice. Skinner wrapped his arms around Mulder, pulled him back, took more of his weight. Held him, supported him, and kissed him—not for sex.

"I want..."

Tension growing fraught, Mulder restless in his arms, needing one more push, one more excuse. "Tell me."

"I want...to disappear. To sink into obscurity, just another G-man who catches the sick psycho bad guys and makes it easier for regular people to sleep at night."

Nothing else, for a long moment, Mulder beginning to move against him, disappearing into the haze of sex. Tempting, as Mulder always was. But it could wait: he could wait. "All of it, Mulder."

Hands grabbing his own, holding on too tight, and of course, never tight enough. Skinner kissed the side of Mulder's averted face, felt the heat of a blush against his lips.

"I want to settle down. White picket fence, golden retriever, the whole nine fucking yards."

"Children?"

Whisper of a grin. "Not unless there's something you haven't told me, Walter."

Truth begets truth. "There's a hell of a lot I haven't told you."

"Yeah, I know, but unless it involves transsexuality or alien-induced additions to your reproductive talents, none of it matters."

Mulder, knowing him, and even so, trusting him enough: filing the serial numbers off a gun. Offering up his most secret dreams. For him. "White picket fence?"

"And a golden retriever."

"Make it a German shepherd and you've got a deal."





Laughter, as if at a joke. Hope, in the hazel eyes, in case it was a promise.

Mulder turning in his embrace, kissing him, whispering to him: “Can I stay?”

Frighteningly easy to actually say the words, to this man at least. “For as long as you like.”

“Yeah?”

Drawing it out, letting the sound linger like a caress. “Yeah.”

Mulder, sprawled out on the rumpled, crumpled blue sheets, teal silk pooling and rippling over rising flesh, Mulder’s fingers so pale against the silk, a small, widening circle spreading irregularly from the tip of Mulder’s cock as Mulder stroked himself through Skinner’s pajamas. Mulder, smiling at him, delight and hope nearly drowning the dregs of fear still haunting those eyes. Mulder, snorting inelegantly, as Skinner—Walter S. Skinner, Assistant Director, despot and fire and brimstone rule-book thumper—called in sick.

Mulder, all yielding strength, under him, around him, holding him and being held by him, staying. For as long as Mulder wanted to, he had promised. For as long as Mulder could admit defeat, he knew. Not long, no matter what Mulder might believe—what Mulder might hope—right now, but for a little while. Before the next case. Before the next victim. Before the next piece of the puzzle was dangled, carrot on a stick Mulder would use to beat himself.

White picket fence, the whole nine yards, Skinner thought, holding Mulder tight enough to draw a protest, slackening his grip only reluctantly, giving and taking kisses offered like golden tear-drops of hope.

But he could still see it in Mulder’s eyes, and he knew the truth as surely as Mulder did: white picket fences become weathered and broken, and in their nightmare reality, dreams would fade long before the dawn.



Beacon in the Night

This one's set somewhere towards the end of fifth season, and is one of many stories that are the result of email from a friend



It had been a complete bitch of a week—and that was before he factored Scully into things.

God, but he was tired. That drive today had been back-breaking, between trying to avoid kamikaze truckers speeding in the downpour and trying to avoid the Borgia-esque comments coming from the passenger seat.

Okay, so the only poison had been in the accuracy of what she'd said.

And she'd been batting a thousand every mile of the way.

Wet shoes left by the front door, wet socks tossed into the trash, answering machine ignored, mail picked up and tossed down onto the coffee table.

Face sour as his stomach, Mulder stripped off his suit, trying very hard not to get another whiff of rancid harbor water as he stuffed it into a heavy-duty Hefty bag. He struggled with the knot in his tie, finally undoing it enough to wrench the damned thing over his head, then came peeling his foul shirt from his body.

He wasn't looking forward to actually taking his boxers off. He did *not* want to know what the harbor water harbored, but Superglue seemed to be a major component. His hair was sticky, his face was itchy and his muscles ached almost as much as his head did.

A hot shower, something to eat, four Advil and bed.

That's what he needed, that's what he wanted, that's what he was going to get. He was not going to think about what Scully had said; he was not going to think about how right Scully had been; he definitely was not going to think about how toned-down and downright kind Scully had been in what she'd said. And he was not going to think about how poisonous the truth could be.



He hadn't fucked up this badly in years—
Information, he thought, mentally mimicking his favorite sf TV computer, he had not fucked up so badly since Roche. And for my next trick, he thought, testing the shower warmth with his hand, I'll put holes in my head to improve the ventilation.

The frightening truth was, if that treatment he'd started hearing rumors about proved to be even halfway as effective as it seemed...he'd do it. He'd put holes in his head, hypnotherapy again, the whole shebang.

That was even more depressing than Scully being kind to him.

He let the water drench him, loosen whatever was keeping his shorts clinging to him like a monkey baby, pushed them down and off and then just stood there, not thinking, just feeling, drifting, letting the heat and the water carry him.

He gave himself a full five minutes of mindlessness, then began washing, relieved that the redness had cleared up—oh, wouldn't it have been *fun* to go into the office on Monday covered in a mysterious rash?

There was nothing in the fridge immobile enough to eat, and he couldn't face even having to zap a can of soup. Chinese it was.

He lay on the couch, waiting for his food, feeling every muscle in his back and shoulders and arms tighten and stiffen. Morning was going to be a joy.

Food came, and was eaten, quickly enough that he didn't really taste it. Bed, at last. To sleep, perchance to dream.

If he could get himself up off the couch. But he was stiff, and sore, and if he went to bed, he would actually feel how lonely he was. Lying here on the couch, loneliness could be kept as an intellectual exercise: an ache in the chest, a hollowness in the belly, a heavy sadness in the mind, yes, it does appear to be loneliness.

But if he went to bed, room enough for two...

He should call. He should just call, say 'hey', drive over there, maybe he wouldn't be the only person needing some physical comfort and closeness tonight.

Yeah? And if tonight was one of the nights when he got the 'Yes, Agent Mulder? Can I help you?' with a glance at the watch? Or if tonight was one of the nights when he was wrapped up in a tight hug before they fucked?

Hell, who would want him like this? He was oozing need and vulnerability, an emotional black

hole. Anyone with any sense ran full speed from someone this needy. And Skinner had plenty of sense.

Plus, he shifted, his back, butt and leg sticking to the couch for a second before parting almost painfully, he couldn't imagine Skinner coping with him dissolving into tears in his arms.

Scully would and could cope—she'd had enough practice—but he and Scully weren't fucking and there was a hunger in his belly tonight, a hunger to match the need and this empty, swirling ache threatening to suck him down.

Bed. He needed to go to bed. Or at least get a blanket or clothes so he could sleep on the couch. Or get up and go to Skinner, take the risk.

His cell phone rang and while Scully would have all sorts of scientific explanations of expectations and knowing a person's habits, he simply knew—felt it in his aching bones—that it was Scully. He ignored it.

After a while—he could see her in his mind, glasses on, hair in a stubby little pony tail, make-up cleansed off, as she mentally counted out how long it would take for him to get out of the shower or find his jacket in the dark—the cell phone stopped ringing. After a pause just long enough to hit speed dial, his regular phone started. He let the answering machine kick in, lay there on his back, listening to Scully's voice fill the room.

"Mulder, it's me. Pick up the phone, Mulder. Mulder, pick up the phone! Okay, you don't want to talk, but listen to me, Mulder. Skinner called me. He's already been contacted by Baltimore PD and the regional office and he is really pissed. He wanted an oral report from me, so he's at least had some of it from your side. He's going to call you, so answer your phone, Mulder, and for God's sake, *don't* smart mouth him."

He heard her take a breath, heard the faint sound of her moving the phone.

"I'll call you in the morning, if you don't call me first. And if I don't hear from you, Mulder, I'm coming over there to make sure that water didn't poison you."

Click. Answering machine click. Whirr. Beep. Silence.

The phone rang.

It would be Skinner, furious with him, mad as hell and spitting bullets after the regional office and the Baltimore PD had finished yelling.

He couldn't face that, not tonight.





Amidst the clutter of aches and pains, one was slowly climbing to the top of the pile: his right shoulder was burning, the pain going from a dull ache to a sharp, stabbing brightness. His arm felt vaguely weak, as if it were asleep, and dimly numb as if he'd been lying on it wrong.

Tomorrow morning was going to be a real joy.

Stifling what he knew would come out as a whining moan, he levered himself up from the couch, eyes narrowing as his skin clung to the leather for a moment. He'd get his Advil, grab a blanket, get some sleep—

His cell phone.

Hi, sir, I know you're pissed with me, I know you want to shoot me or fire me or another of our modern violent words but you know, what I really need is a fuck, and someone to hold me.

Oh, yeah, Skinner—in full rage—would just love that. Especially over a cellular line. Scully would raise her eyebrow and ask him just when he'd first noticed this death wish of his.

He'd deal with Skinner and Scully and failure and pain tomorrow.

At least he had a tomorrow—and shook his head, appalled by his own self-indulgent melodrama.

But he had nearly died tonight. Had felt cables and twisted metal and...things, moving things...reaching for him in the black rankness of the harbor.

If he could survive that, he could survive a few aches and pains, and Skinner mad at him and Scully feeling sorry for him.

His phone again, the machine clicking on just as whoever it was—whoever it was? oh, yeah, a real X-File mystery—hung up. the dial tone buzzing for a few seconds before the machine beeped off.

He was spreading the blanket on the couch when he heard the noise at the door.

He straightened, stood there, naked, as the familiar, back-lit outline filled the doorway. Stood there, not covering himself, as the door was closed and the light cut down to the small window over the door.

Deja vu, because he'd already lived this. Waiting for trouble, and Skinner, lit from behind and above, walking towards him.

A beacon in the night.

The heavy charcoal-gray coat swung from Skinner's shoulders. The light didn't reach his face, certainly not his eyes, no clues, just the body

language: Skinner, advancing on him, meaningfully.

There were a dozen things Mulder could do, just coming up with a short list off the top of his head, but they all involved decisions and talking and moving when all he wanted...

His dad would have killed him for being like this. His dad always hated the 'faggy' side of his son; the side that wasn't afraid of wanting, the side that was man enough to admit to hurt and fear and need.

Skinner was still advancing, still obscured, still silent.

Hands, grabbing his upper arms, hard enough to hurt, hard enough to bruise as he was shaken, twice, three times, teeth rattling against each other.

And then—

Being turned, pushed towards the bedroom, Skinner dumping the dry cleaning onto the floor, picking up the spread-open book and dropping that too.

The mood Skinner was in, this wasn't going to be a gentle, easy, no-moving-around mutual hand job. A glimpse of tight lips, clenched jaw, and Mulder knew exactly what was on the agenda.

Careful what you wish for—his fortune cookie should have warned him instead of waffling on about cranes and the future.

He started to talk, to tell Skinner that he appreciated the offer, but he just wasn't up to being fucked tonight.

Got as far as "I appreciate—" before Skinner turned a full-force glare on him. "BENGAY?"

Mulder's first thought was 'Who the hell is Ben?' but his brain was more or less functional. "I'll get it."

In the bathroom, he managed to avoid looking in the mirror.

Then in the bedroom, he managed to avoid looking directly at Skinner. Too needy, he was too needy and he knew it.

Face down on the bed, and behind him, he could hear shoes being unlaced and a coat—jacket, too?—being dropped onto the chair.

Then the familiar smell of BENGAY, and the familiar warming, burning stickiness of it, and the not-familiar-enough feel of big hands rubbing his back.

"Shoulder," he mumbled, half-nodding at the offending right shoulder.





Fingers on him, hurting him, but releasing something too, the pain in his shoulder slowly reducing to a level he could nearly ignore.

Then hands on his back again, and on his thighs, his calves, carefully bypassing the scrape on the back of his left leg. Up again, on the outside of his thighs, on his ass, massaging at the hardness lingering under a red mark: a beauty of a bruise in the making. The small of his back, the long muscles that ached from everything, the shoulder muscles that ached from driving.

He lay there, heat sinking into him, aches slipping out of him, and hoped he could keep his brain on hold for another few minutes. His own version of superstition: if he thought about it, it would fall apart, it would go wrong—Skinner would remember how furious he was, what the Baltimore PD had said, what the regional SAC had accused.

So he didn't think about it. He just lay there and let it happen.

He still ached, and moving wasn't high on his list of fun things to do, but his mind was beginning to run along familiar lines. They'd only fucked eleven times, never just cuddled or slept together, always upstairs to the guest bedroom, sex, and then back to reality. He wanted sex: a good come would get him to sleep, relax him enough that he'd be less stiff in the morning—especially since Skinner had rubbed half a tube of BENGAY into him.

Almost sleepy, he spread his legs, and waited.

The shift of the mattress, the absence of weight, the sound of water running in the bathroom, Skinner washing the BENGAY off his hands.

Good.

Gingerly, Mulder rolled over in time to see Skinner coming back into the bedroom. Advancing on him again, just as meaningfully. Stopping at the foot of the bed, taking off tie, unbuckling belt, pulling shirt tails free, unbuttoning the crisp white fabric, revealing the broad expanse of chest with its swathe of curling hair.

Mulder knew how that hair felt; knew it between his fingers, against his palms, against his chest. Against his back.

He shivered, and his cock stirred.

He saw Skinner's gaze drop to his cock, and the heat from those brown eyes stirred him again, his cock filling and firming, feeling good.

But he didn't touch himself. Lay there, letting the balance shift between them, not fighting or

posturing or anything, not this time. For the first time, in fact, he was yielding the way he'd wanted to from the very beginning.

He had almost died—again—tonight. He needed. He wanted. And...he trusted.

That shaking hadn't been from an assistant director angry at an agent. That shaking had been from a man who'd spoken to Scully, a man who knew Mulder's side of things. A man who'd no doubt been informed, clearly, cleanly, and clinically, of just how long Mulder had been under that water tonight.

The click of glasses being placed on a wooden surface, and Mulder's cock, pavlovian, pulsed and lengthened and hardened.

A button undone, a zipper lowered, pants and briefs pulled down and off in one smooth motion.

Thick, heavy cock. Mulder knew that, too. Knew how it felt in his hands, in his mouth, in his ass. Was willing, tonight, to let Skinner decide where he'd feel it this time.

"Move," Skinner told him, low and dark.

Mulder moved, watching as Skinner, not hurrying, but efficient, muscles bunching and moving under tanned skin, as Skinner bundled up the comforter, arranged the pillows too, until there was a miniature soft mesa in the middle of the bed.

So he was to be fucked tonight. Half an hour ago and his back would have yelled in protest at the thought of it, but the Advil and the BENGAY had kicked in, and he had a nice soft hummock to lie on, to keep him at just the right height to be fucked without straining a thing.

And he had the feel of those hands on him. Strong, knowing, commanding hands, moving him into position. Blunt finger rubbing at him, slickness sliding into him, his body tight but loosening fast, remembering this, enjoying this. Two fingers, and he sighed, wriggled, wrapped his arms around the pile of pillows under his chest. Sighed again, uncaring of how it sounded, as the two fingers fucked him, slow and easy, and Skinner's other hand took hold of him, fingers wrapping around his cock, thumb slipping back and forth over the head: just the way he liked it best.

Warmth, stealing through him at that, even though come morning, his mind would argue that it was simple courtesy to remember what a sex partner enjoyed. Fingers squeezing his cock, sliding lower, dandling his balls, tugging just that tiny bit that always made him harder, then back up, a tight





tunnel moving round his cock, Skinner letting him fuck his fist without having to move.

He was being pampered, and he loved it.

His ass was empty, and he could feel his hole stay open for a moment, the odd sensation of cool air soon replaced by roundness, warm, no, hot, slick roundness, opening him again, round and hot, yielding and unyielding, so insistent, so hard, but with that ridge of near softness as the head slid into him. Hard now, just hard, the tiny bump of the big vein that ran down the side of Skinner's cock, the vein Mulder had licked and mouthed, the vein that was measuring Skinner's length inside him. Thick, long, hot. Heavy, too, a comfortable, comforting weight inside him, and the slide of soft cock skin caressing the softness inside his ass, pushing in, pulling out, so slow, so easy, so...

Against his ass, he felt the prickle of hair, and the slow cling of Skinner's balls before Skinner slid slowly from him. Sweet rubbing inside, and then more of the sweet, hot feeling as Skinner pushed back into him, the soft skin around firm balls, the soft skin around hard cock, the hard skin of callused palm around the soft skin of his own cock. Soft and hard, hard and soft, in, out, slow, steady rise of passion and pleasure.

Against his back, the tickle of chest hair, and then the steady slide of chest against him, the small pressures of hard nipples rubbing him, and the hardness inside him, and the hardness around his cock and—

They hadn't done this much. Not this. Three times, by Mulder's count. But Skinner was doing it this time: kisses, to the back of his neck, to the tender, sensitive side of his neck, teeth nibbling on the lobe of his ear, tongue tip wetly inside his ear shivering him all the way down to his cock and his ass: softness and hardness and wetness and heat.

He turned his face to the side, and was rewarded, Skinner pushing farther up inside of him, and Skinner's mouth on his, too good to register awkwardness, tongue inside him, his tongue welcomed inside Skinner, smooth teeth, ligule tongue, the taste of him, the limber, liquid hunger of him.

He hadn't known. He hadn't seen, hadn't realized, hadn't known. Maybe Skinner hadn't known either. But it was there now, in the tenderness of the kiss, in the careful, controlled way Skinner was fucking him. Owing him. Covering him completely, hairy thighs against Mulder's,

feet nudging Mulder's wider apart, hand possessing Mulder's cock, cock possessing Mulder's body.

Slow, and easy, not hurried, not frantic, but steady, satisfying, building up inside his ass where Skinner's cock was, building up outside in his cock where Skinner's hand was, his cock ready, just another stroke away—

And he was there, coming into and over Skinner's hand, Skinner not stopping, hand still moving, stimulating, demanding, dragging every last drop of pleasure from Mulder, while that cock inside him thrust deep, sudden, burst of movement, control cast aside, Skinner fucking him hard, as Mulder's ass spasmed around him, fast and hard, raw and honest, wetness inside him, deep inside him, Skinner shuddering over him, clutching him, holding him, mouth open on the back of Mulder's neck.

Over. Damp, sticky, cooling, skin sticking to skin, aches reasserting themselves but only dimly, far away under the satiated limpness. Hands moving him again, soft cock leaving him, pillows rearranged, himself rearranged, blankets and comforter pulled up around him. Sleep gathering him in close, ensnaring him, Morpheus wrapping furry legs around him, crisp hair of hugging forearms under his hands, soft chest hair against his back, warm breath against his neck.

He was staying? Skinner was staying?

Mulder nearly woke up at that, but he was hugged again, and kissed, and whispered to.

"Go to sleep."

So he did.

Three AM

Movement.

He knew what it meant, and grabbed at the arms around him. A pause, and then more movement. Reality. Couldn't argue with reality, not that he'd ever tell Scully that.

Coolness against his back, then blankets heavy against him. He wanted to be able to smell Skinner, but nothing could compete with the BENGAY.

Maybe next time.

He rolled over onto his back, wincing in discomfort as his muscles complained. Watched, lonely, as Skinner put his FBI camouflage and armor back on.

Heard: "My office. Monday, 8 AM, and you had better have a convincing report as to why you showed such reckless disregard."





Then for a moment, Skinner met his eyes, and let it show.
Just for a moment.
“Sorry,” Mulder said, nearly whispering.
A severe nod, Skinner putting on his coat, straightening his glasses.
Hesitating at the door.
Coming back to the bed, face unreadable, and

then Mulder’s breath caught in his throat: Skinner’s hands, so big, encompassing, one behind his neck, one cupping his face, holding him immobile, as Skinner leaned down, and kissed him. Hard. Deep. Demanding. Possessive.
Then the swing of Skinner’s coat, the click of the door closing, and Mulder was left alone, thinking.



A View from the Top

I've read and enjoyed many, many stories with this type of theme, but I really missed stories told from *this* point of view. This particular one is set well into sixth season (but before Two Fathers/One Son: this is before Mulder was stunned into near immobility!).



Halfway across the room he stopped, taking a moment to pull the sheet tighter, until the dark blue was perfectly smooth, the pillows plumped and ready. A nod of satisfaction, then it was back to more details: taking the clean towels to the bathroom, arranging the razor and accouterments just so on the counter, hot water bottle under the sink, fresh towels hung precisely, Mulder's favorite shampoo left right at hand in the shower, fresh soap for the bathtub, and the pale yellow candles for in here.

A sharp, measuring stare, but nothing dared be out of place or missing. Good. Back to the bedroom to get that the way he wanted it, too. The comforter was already stowed away, a blanket folded on the chair in case Mulder got cold, the scented candles arranged to provide just enough light, his favorite old Zippo lying dented and dinged beside the unscented white and red candles. He took a moment to arrange them, too much practice over too many years to leave himself fumbling for what was needed: nothing surer to spoil the mood than having to stop to look for things.

Downstairs now, to the kitchen, to make sure there were snacks ready, lots of orange juice and the too-sweet strawberry soda that Mulder favored when he wasn't drinking diet Coke or iced tea; salsa and chips, sunflower seeds, real food with plenty of protein and carbs. Stamina, he thought to himself, smiling: he planned on them both needing lots and lots of stamina this weekend.

The blanket was warm from the dryer, smelling fresh as he draped it across the couch within easy reach. More candles, one of Mulder's minor quirks, but easy enough to indulge. A glance at his watch; not quite time to light them, even though Mulder



had a tendency to be early for these weekends, if for nothing else.

The upright chair was moved beside the front door for Mulder to leave his stuff tidily when he came in and... He looked around, satisfied: and that was it, everything was arranged just so, nothing else to be done. He dropped down onto the sofa, feet up on the coffee table, grabbed the remote, and starting surfing.

Half an hour to go.

The television went blind and dumb, and he stretched, beginning the exercises that would pump him up, get him ready for the pleasurable exertions ahead, and (just coincidentally, he thought deprecatingly to himself as he put himself through his regimen of push ups) would have Mulder's mouth hanging open and drooling in two seconds flat.

Time for the candles, Mulder's joke gift of a disposable glow-in-the-dark alien lighter for these, and the scented ones upstairs. Another look around the bedroom, the soft lights and reassuring scent taking the edge off the stark practicality of the stripped-down bed.

Yes. Nearly perfect.

One last touch.

He opened the blanket chest at the foot of the bed, took out a leather belt (his favorite, and Mulder's too, all shrieks to the contrary be damned), and laid it diagonally across the middle of the bed.

Oh yeah. That was hot, that was...

He smiled; Mulder's ass was going to match the wax from those red candles pretty damn soon.

Right on cue: the door, chiming. Mulder, outside, waiting.

Poor bastard would be nervous, Skinner knew: always was, until they got started. Until Mulder began to settle down, relax into it.

Whatever 'it' was for Mulder, he thought, running lightly down the stairs, hurrying so Mulder wouldn't have to wait outside tormenting himself.

Sure enough, the external signs of inner denial: the lowered head, not quite looking at him, lower lip thrust out. But also the other familiar signals: the leather jacket, the silver chain necklace around his neck, and no watch.

But... There were more than the usual jitters going on tonight. Tempting though it was to turn a blind eye to the deeper, unconscious signals,

Skinner didn't pretend ignorance, didn't allow himself to shirk his responsibilities—didn't allow himself even a sigh. So much for getting right into things after too long without: there were more than the usual jitters going on in Mulder's head tonight.

Fuck.

Well, nobody said it was going to be all fun'n'games, he told himself, stepping aside, watching Mulder, trying to read what was going on in that labyrinthine mind. Noted the glance, the second glance, the brief, edgy touch of the ladder-backed chair.

"Beer?" he asked, and wasn't very proud of the surge of disappointment he felt at Mulder's relieved response. Dammit, they'd had to do without for so fucking long and now... And now Mulder was obviously feeling fragile, so what was a delay? It would still happen, and be all the better for a bit more anticipation—and for Mulder's enjoyment of it.

Mulder followed him into the kitchen, smiling a bit shyly as he helped himself from the jug of home-brewed iced tea in the refrigerator.

That smile should be licensed, Skinner thought, stifling his reaction to it, standing back and giving Mulder room instead of just jumping him then and there.

And if he were surer of Mulder's frame of mind, he would just jump Mulder: sometimes, the best solution was to cut through Mulder's insecurity and intellectual crap, just get on with it, a plain hard fucking to clear the air and let them get onto the really important stuff. But misjudge what was going on inside that elegantly convoluted mind, and it would all end in viciously hurled words and no sex, or shivering disinterred memories and no sex, or an icily double-dare session that was all challenge and malice and the sort of sex that wasn't worth the effort. There'd been enough of all of those early on in their relationship: Skinner had no desire to let adolescent impatience set things back to the early, difficult days.

Mulder trailed behind him into the living room, waited until Skinner sat down before sitting on the floor at Skinner's feet.

Another sigh stifled: push me, pull you, that was Mulder all over. Skinner took a long pull of his beer, started stroking his fingers through Mulder's hair, down along the tender, vulnerable nape. Mulder leaned into the touch, lowering his head, hand snaking round Skinner's calf, cheek resting on Skinner's knee.





Oh shit, Skinner thought, flashing back to other times like this, what the fuck's happened this time?

"Tell me," he said, annoyed with himself that affection and worry colored what was supposed to be a flat demand.

"Just..." the flex of shoulder muscles under his palm as Mulder shrugged. "Everything."

Oh. "Kersh, no X-Files, Spender, Fowley and Scully?" he recited the usual list of 'everything,' "And Mom."

Shit. Poor bastard—to have that mother of his on top of 'everything'; an 'everything' that if the rumor mill was as accurate as usual, included the latest run-in with Spender, that none-too-discreet remark from Fowley and what was probably Scully's private and personal reaction to it, and Kersh's latest humiliating damn near public reaming of Mulder. Skinner had seen it all before: the talk, whispers, averted glances, and these days, Mulder didn't have the basement to hide away in.

Mulder was going to need this weekend. And maybe that explained the hesitation, the jitters: that this time, it wasn't as bad as when Scully's family had rejected Mulder and Scully had denied him credit for his finding the cure to her cancer. Maybe this time it was simply old-fashioned nervousness because Mulder knew what this much need would do to him, that Mulder would succumb farther than he'd ever dared before. Which had to be frightening, Skinner thought, fingering Mulder's lips, touching smooth teeth, limber tongue, no words on the tip of that tongue, Mulder struck dumb, Skinner knowing only too well how it felt to have no words, to depend on the other person divining the truth.

He leaned down and pulled Mulder up at the same time, stealing Mulder's balance, taking Mulder's full weight in his arms, and kissed the open mouth. Took it, pushing his tongue in, kissing Mulder hard, biting on tongue, lip, before finally letting go.

Ah, yeah, there it was, in Mulder's eyes: the right response. The beginning, the heady, intoxicating beginning of submission and willingness. And hunger.

Oh yeah. Mulder did need this right now. A few modifications to his original plan for this weekend to make this work, but yeah, pretty much the way it always was between them.

But careful, he reminded himself, watching his fingers glisten from Mulder sucking them in, tongue flickering against him, don't get fooled by

Mulder's Scully-inspired 'I'm fine' routine. Don't go too far.

Because when he was like this, Mulder was an open invitation to excess. No limits. No safety net.

It scared the hell out of him to think what would happen to Mulder with the wrong person.

Another kiss, lingering this time, indulging himself in some gentleness, letting the fire smolder until he was kissing hard again, his hand pressed flat and strong against the exposed expanse of Mulder's throat. "Strip," he whispered against lips still trying to kiss him, "I want you naked."

Felt a *frisson* of his own as the power of his words rippled through Mulder, hazel eyes dilating, mouth still open, the tip of tongue visible. "Yes, sir," husky-voiced, so much emotion in those two words.

Grace, and elegance, as Mulder crossed the room, clothes draped neatly over the chair, shoes placed underneath, as per those early days of instructions. Tease, he thought, affection warming him almost as much as desire, as Mulder bent naked to stuff his socks neatly into his shoes, his ass pale, a tantalizing display of what belonged to Skinner.

Mine, it sang through him. Mine.

"Over here."

Already partially erect, Mulder walked towards him, Mulder's cock long and pallid, the hair very, very dark; there, a dark sparkling of hair up on the chest, and there, a spark darkling in the eyes as Mulder stared at him, so hungry, so needy, doing as commanded, coming very close.

"On your knees."

Instant obedience, denied everywhere else but here, for these weekends or evenings or stolen afternoons, for these times that satisfied the soul even more than the body. No hands touching him, Mulder simply kneeling there, passive, willing, hands clasped loosely behind his back, head bowed, such flawless, arousing submission. Skinner luxuriated in the small thrill of power as Mulder, helpless, licked his lips at the familiar sound of Skinner unbuttoning.

"Suck me," Skinner said, the words obeyed almost before they'd been spoken. Mulder's mouth around him, nuzzling at him, sucking at him, drawing his cock out, lips tight around the head, sliding back down to the base, the press of forehead and nose against the pit of his belly, his cock hardening slowly, a nice, easy, build-up, heat





pooling and lingering as the wetness nuzzled and licked at him. "Good," he said, stroking the back of Mulder's neck. "Get me hard."

More obedience in this, of course, although the enthusiasm was flattering, Mulder's eyes open and attentive, looking up at him, mouth wide and wet around his cock, then lower, doing what Mulder knew he loved, Mulder kneeling there, unbound and all the more bound by that, begging for approval.

Easy to give, when his balls were being sucked on, tongue rippling against him inside that moist haven.

"That's enough for now," he said, still only at half-mast, pleasure enough but no distraction. No hurry tonight, after all, two and a half days stretching before them, a rare weekend when neither of them had pressure of work nor out-of-town travel. A *frisson* of pleasure again, as he tucked himself away, taunting, taking his time, touching himself when Mulder no longer was permitted that.

He looked down at the face upturned towards him. "Upstairs."

"Yes, sir," not whispered, nothing ludicrous like that—God, the way Mulder had been at the beginning! Not really his fault, Skinner conceded, giving Mulder's naked rear a friendly swat, the flesh starkly white for a second, the imprint of his hand suddenly flooding into pinkness. No, not really Mulder's fault at all, considering the books the fool had been reading, he decided, slipping one finger up inside Mulder's ass, the sudden penetration making Mulder gasp as Skinner pushed him forward up the stairs. But what Mulder had lacked in accurate knowledge, he'd more than made up for with enthusiasm. And honesty.

No false pretenses with Mulder, nope.

And again, frightening to think what would happen to Mulder if the wrong person got hold of him.

He let Mulder go at the top of the stairs, leading the way into the bedroom, Mulder stopping on the threshold awaiting permission or perhaps their ritual of command.

"Come in," Skinner told him, staring at Mulder, savoring the moment as the candles lit Mulder's face and Mulder's gaze lit upon the strap across the bed.

As Mulder's cock jerked in reaction.

Hell if he knew why being on the receiving end turned Mulder on, but man, it was wonderful to

take that, to use it and turn it into this perfect balance.

Mulder stood there, cock filling, actually rising, standing out from his body. Gorgeous cock, Skinner thought yet again, Mulder never failing to impress and please him. Very long, about an inch and a half longer than Skinner himself, but thinner, darker than expected against the pale skin. Balls still hanging too high, Skinner's fingers rough on the tender shapes inside the rumpled skin, Mulder's toes curling and cock hardening the more he tugged.

Hidden in plain sight, in the African bowl he'd brought back from the second honeymoon that had finally killed his marriage, amidst the cufflinks and watch straps and spare shoelaces, lay a small tangle of leather. Mulder's eyes followed his every move, and Skinner indulged himself in a flex of his shoulder, forerunner for what would come later, proud that his bared forearms lured Mulder's gaze with their strength, and their promise. "On the bed, on your back."

Mulder smiling at him then, the shadows very nearly driven from his eyes, the change quick enough to give Skinner pause. But then it was: "Yes, sir!" complete with jaunty salute and a kiss blown in his direction.

"Sassy little shit," Skinner told him, indulgent, fond of this cockily submissive behavior, the show of spirit adding zest to the power of domination: and reassurance that the shift in mood was a matter of trust, of taking comfort and some measure of joy from what they did, not another bout of dangerous denial.

A reward, then, for that, for both of them. A quick slap to Mulder's cock, then holding it in his left hand, right hand flicking flat slaps across the head, the flesh softening in his grip, darkening, Mulder groaning in that arcane mystery of pleasure through pain. Several more slaps, sweat beading on Mulder's forehead, and then the cock in Skinner's hand began to recover, hardening again, slowly, very slowly, heating up in Skinner's hand, precum appearing, slippery against Skinner's palm.

Skinner stopped slapping, wiped his hand, hard, against the roundness of Mulder's balls. Nice, the way the rippled skin glistened in the candlelight, the way Mulder's cock, swollen hard, lay up against his belly. "Spread 'em," he said, desire roughening his voice, pleasure roughening his touch as he deftly lifted and twisted and pulled





Mulder's cock and balls into the harness. Oh yeah, Skinner thought, stroking skin shining tautly over the ellipsoid delicacy of Mulder's balls, now that is nice. He checked carefully, loosening the strap around the base of Mulder's cock just a little—considering how much time Mulder was going to spend in this over the course of the weekend, it wouldn't do to leave it too tight and Mulder, bless his perverse little heart, actually liked it when the damn thing hurt, so he couldn't be relied on to judge if the cockstrap was too tight—and then Skinner tightened the divider a little, pausing again to admire the way one leather band stretched Mulder's balls down and how the narrow one... He grinned, fully aware of how nervous that made Mulder, as he thought of an old ad, about lifting and separating.

Playtex.

Now there was an idea. For a time when Mulder was surer of who he really was, and fonder of who he really was, but yes, that was surely an image to conjure with. In the meantime, though, his full attention coming back to what he was doing, there were other delights to be had.

Skinner ran his hands over Mulder's body, mapping his claims, catching nipples between his fingertips and squeezing, squeezing, until Mulder's back arched and Skinner felt the pulse of arousal heat through himself again at the sight of sweat-dampened skin and the red marks around brown nipples.

He tugged Mulder's cock, not gently, and Mulder followed the painful grip up off the bed, a half step behind Skinner all the way to the bathroom. The light in here was too sharp, too bright, after the softened glow in the bedroom, but then, Skinner wasn't into blood.

Had never asked if Mulder was.

Quite honestly didn't want to know. Didn't want to go there. Not until Mulder was even steadier than he'd become over these many months.

He ran the water till it was hot, added it to the antique shaving mug Mulder had offered up silently, almost embarrassed, one weekend; lathered the brush up and settled it against Mulder's face. A calmness in Mulder's eyes, as he knelt there, his back against Skinner's stomach and chest, as Skinner loomed over him, this ritual so soothing between them.

White suds covering tanned skin, surgical gray of straight-edged steel revealing the curve of tan

skin again, naked, smooth. The old-fashioned sound and sight of straight razor against a man's face and neck, the raptor glide over the curve of chin and over the exposed bump of Adam's apple. The absolute trust of a honed blade pressed against jugular.

The way Mulder's eyes stared up into his, Mulder's neck tilted back painfully, the faith and comfort in Mulder's level, steady gaze. Serenity gazing back up at him for this short pause in their daily battles, both private and public. For both of them, in this, a balance. The familiar feelings lapped at him as he stropped the sharp blade delicately across Mulder's face and throat, Mulder pliant in his hands.

Skinner's cock pulsed, again, and he considered stripping now, to feel his skin against the bare skin of Mulder's back.

No.

Not yet. Make Mulder wait a little while longer. Wait till the hunger in Mulder was painful. Until Mulder begged, really begged, not some polite 'game,' not some perfectly nuanced bit of rôle playing. The real thing. The absolute real thing, no barriers, no masks, no nothing. Just need. Raw, aching, starving need, begging and pleading.

"Sir?"

"Hmm?"

Skinner held the hot, damp towel over Mulder's face, kept it there for those few seconds longer than Mulder's breath would hold, watched, entranced, as Mulder's cock pulsed upwards and Mulder's fist clenched, hips thrusting forward helplessly.

So close to coming, already.

Power settled comfortably across Skinner's shoulders.

He lifted the towel, let Mulder breathe, and then stopped it again.

Counted, in his head. Watched again, and felt the pleasure roll through him.

"Yes?" he said again, Mulder's face glowing and pink now, all the soap wicked away by the towel.

"Sir, Assistant Director Kersh was happy to sign off on my vacation request."

Skinner's fingers drifted down to Mulder's chest, tugging on the hair high on Mulder's pecs. "And?"

"I promise not to get into a situation where I end up in the hospital where Scully would see enough to ask awkward questions."

Skinner didn't say anything, just bent over



Mulder's shoulder, his hands filling with the coarseness and thickness of nearly black pubic hair. He pulled, a couple of strands clinging still to his fingers, tears starting involuntarily in Mulder's eyes. And Mulder's cock lifting, just once, at the jolt of arousal his grip had caused.

"I promise, I won't even do anything to make Scully shoot me."

Skinner reached lower, both hands carding through the dark hair growing thicker at the inside crease of Mulder's legs, thinning out on his thighs, growing thicker again behind his balls, up between his cheeks, and the sudden smoothness of the hole that opened so quickly, so ravenously, to Skinner's fingers.

"No," he said, watching his refusal trigger a struggle in Mulder to obey, to not argue. "I'll keep you like this."

Waited, doing nothing more than letting Mulder feel the weight and the promising threat of his hands, there, on leather-bound cock and balls and naked hole. Waited out the anger and rebellion, waited out Mulder's own battles, bringing his hands up the length of Mulder's body, wrapping one large hand around Mulder's neck, calluses against Mulder's pulse. Let the power flow from him, through him, down, into and around Mulder. Let loose the leash, just a little, to show the fire in his eyes.

Waited, as Mulder swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing against his palm, and Mulder unknotted his shoulders, then closed his eyes.

Beautiful. On his knees at Skinner's feet, eyes closed, throat arched for the honed blade, under Skinner's hands, under Skinner's will, Mulder was truly beautiful. Skinner kissed him, on each closed eyelid, on the parted lips.

The very last of the shadows had left Mulder's eyes, cast out with the last of his responsibility.

"You're in my hands," Skinner said quietly, the truth a satisfying, nearly tangible warmth in his chest.

"Yes," Mulder breathed against his lips, reaching for another kiss. "Yes."

And Skinner smiled then, letting Mulder see how gratified he was that Mulder had finally gone beyond those ill-informed preconceptions of all those months ago. No need for 'sirs' every second, and no need for Mulder to hold any responsibility at all: there was absolutely no doubt who was in charge here and nothing, nothing else at all, had ever felt so right.

He didn't need to give a verbal order, a gentle nudge of Mulder's shoulder was enough: enough to get both obedience, and a grimace of distaste. "Too bad, Mulder," he said to the 'don't wanna' expression mutinous on Mulder's face. "I told you, you're in my hands, whether you like it—" he opened the cupboard, began filling the hot water bottle with comfortably warm water, "or not."

He pushed Mulder's knees farther apart, and slipped the nozzle easily inside, slapping Mulder's ass good and hard, a reward for Mulder's submission to something disliked so heartily, his palm-print glowing white then red again.

God, he never tired of that. Never would, not when it was Mulder on the receiving end.

Yin and Yang, his ex-wife would call it, and her voice would be wistful for what they'd never quite managed to have. A regret, that, deeper than poison, for it hadn't been she who'd failed.

It had been this, in him, part of him, intrinsic and undeniable, and when all was said and done, this—his hand stung from that last spank on Mulder's squirming ass—was his sexual orientation.

This.

Mulder on his hands and knees, head bowed, hands clasped loosely over the back of his neck, a white plastic nozzle up his ass so that Walter Skinner could drain warm water into him. Complete control, dominance, power and pleasure and pain.

Not something that was any part of Sharon.

But Mulder... Thank God for Mulder, warts and all, a walking risk factor and a walking wet dream.

Skinner squeezed the bag in one large hand, his other tracing patterns up and down Mulder's spine, reaching down unexpectedly to pull the nozzle out. "Hold it," he said, finger rimming round the clenched hole. "Then you know where I want you."

He started the kitchen timer, the ticking very, very loud, echoing around, bouncing from tiled wall to tiled wall. He closed the door, still able to hear, just and no more, the Captain Hook-crocodile tick of the clock, a low-tech remote control.

Skinner went downstairs, poured himself a mug of coffee from the carafe, grabbed a handful of those biscotti Mulder had got him hooked on. Feet up on the table again, fingers clicking on the remote as the back of his mind clicked the time over, minute by minute, most of him focused on what was going on upstairs.



He knew when the buzzer would sound. Knew, from experience, how long it would be before the bathroom door would open and close. Sat then, still, surfing fast enough to make even Mulder cry halt, long enough that Mulder would be squirming and he wasn't exactly unmoved himself.

The candlelight was wonderfully soft, incredibly flattering to the man who lay there. Rembrandt, Velazquez, would have painted him like this, with the light skipping and playing over him, with the lush colors of fabric, the texture of skin, the flow of muscle and bone and line and beauty.

Of course, it would have taken a Caravaggio to include the unlit candles and the belt.

For a long moment, Skinner simply stood at the foot of the bed and looked at his own blank canvas, stretched out, primed and ready for him.

The skin was very fine, delicate nuances of color, until the tan suddenly faded to white, and Skinner's hands itched to turn that to red. Bruises, perhaps, mottled purple that would blossom into deep bruises over the next day, the transition to yellow and beige, private markers of their time together.

And another shading, this one of pleasure, within him: Mulder lying there, completely still, not a single unsanctioned glance over his shoulder, those hands staying clasped around the rustic pine poles of the headboard.

Such obedience. Such submission. Such temptation.

"Roll over."

Mulder twisting round, graceful and strong, the exercise regime obviously paying off. Dark hair still there, the lure of such smooth skin underneath. To strip Mulder of these marks of manhood, not to turn him into a boy, but to make him...not equal. To remove him from the ranks of Men, the decision makers, the power brokers, the providers. To make him...owned.

And bare.

Skin that had not been exposed for over two decades. How smooth, how pale, the unseen, secret details that would be revealed.

Vacation time approved. Oh yeah, this time, he could do it, with clear conscience.

And later, as the hair grew back in, to meet Mulder in public innocence, to watch him trying not to scratch, not to squirm...that would be a salacious delight all its own.

There was absolutely no doubt what was going to happen later this weekend when this first hunger had been sated.

Mulder's cock was nearly hard, still, despite the loathed solitary routine earlier, but his expression was very nearly soft, trust and compliance smoothing time's lines from Mulder's face, the luxury of safe obedience gentling the jitters of earlier, leaving behind an empty bowl for Skinner to fill.

"Look at me," he said.

Deliberately, Skinner began stripping, wanting this time to see Mulder's reaction. Yeah, there it was: the eyes watching everything he was doing, the cock responsive, the tongue licking that lower lip—goddamn, he was going to bite that lip, hard, when Mulder least expected it, bite it hard and hold on until Mulder whimpered and came, clinging to him—Mulder's arms flexing with the effort of not disobeying the standing, tacit, command. No touching without permission.

And for now, permission denied. Desire as torture, a sweet irony.

His own hands on his flies, one button at a time, one button at a very slow time, and there it was: a murmur of sound from Mulder, stifled.

"You can talk," he said, his reward being a flicker of the right kind of fear in Mulder's eyes. Oh, yes, Mulder could talk, which meant that at some point, Mulder's walls would crumple, Mulder wouldn't be hiding, and Mulder would say a hell of a lot more than Mulder was comfortable with. And tomorrow, when the sex had died down, the memory of what he'd said would come back to haunt Mulder, to make him as vulnerable and need-filled as in the darkest moment of tonight.

Another button undone, but he didn't push his jeans down out of the way. He pulled his cock free, as he had done earlier, and of course, Mulder's mouth reacted, his throat showing him swallowing hard.

Skinner spat in his hand, slicked his cock up, taking his time, admiring the way the candlelight caught the dampness on him and the way his veins and cockhead cast shadows along him. Pulled his balls out into the light, handling them gently, running his fingers tenderly underneath and over them.

Looked up sharply, and caught the raw hunger on Mulder's face.

"Want it?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."



Oh, now that was nice, the honorific and obedience so freely offered. “Why?”

“Sir?”

“Why do you want it, boy?”

The usual moment of torture, as Mulder dealt with the burden and baggage of the word, that face so damned expressive, it was a miracle Mulder ever fooled anyone.

The not-always moment as Mulder yielded to the word, to the need for it, to the joy of it. No over-the-knee spanking tonight, not for that. Still, there was always the belt, he thought, his gaze straying to the heavy black tongue of leather. Mulder’s stare followed his, then tangled with his, truth unspoken between them.

“I want to suck your cock.”

Not a real answer, although the rest of it was revealed in Mulder’s eyes. It was enough for now: after all, patience was a virtue and had its own merits when applied to Mulder. Skinner got up onto the bed, knelt astride Mulder’s head, his cock and balls positioned ready to fuck Mulder’s face, the rest of Mulder within easy reach.

“Then suck me, boy,” he said, and thrust his cock all the way into Mulder, into his mouth, farther, right into his throat, the shock of it choking Mulder, the strong throat rippling round his cock like a snake. He held it there, against Mulder’s coughing, then pulled out, slowly, feeling the coolness of air being dragged desperately into Mulder’s lungs.

“Thank you,” he heard, the beginnings of the real answer, words whispered hoarsely, and he shoved forward again, pushing in hard and deep, cockhead massaged by Mulder’s throat, his balls pressed into by Mulder’s nose, pressure and caress and contact all over him. Oh yeah, this was good, this was fine, and he pushed that fraction farther, stopping Mulder’s breathing again, until Mulder’s throat gagged around him, gorgeous, firm caress, and he pulled out letting Mulder breathe.

“Oh God I need this—” and he was inside Mulder again, fucking this time, pushing in, pulling out, Mulder’s breathing matched to his thrusts, still controlling Mulder’s breathing, a manifestation of trust. His was cock wet from Mulder’s mouth and throat, Mulder’s face wet from his own saliva, and yes, he was inside, all the way inside, and—

He took the wooden clothespin from his pocket, squeezed the end with one hand—

Pull out, almost all the way, his cock sliding wetly over Mulder’s face and—

Squeezed Mulder’s nipple with the other hand, and just as he shoved in all the way again, the soundless bite of the clothespin on Mulder’s nipple, the sudden sucking in of air, pain, everything, his cock going, oh God, going even deeper than before.

Easing out, letting Mulder catch his breath, letting the heaving chest slow down to near normal, the skin over the arching collarbones flushed rosy.

A single, fairly gentle slap to the pin, Mulder’s back arching up off the bed, plus that sound, that intake of broken word, that combination of pleasure and pain that belonged to Skinner because he was the cause of it, the true source of it, Mulder simply the mouthpiece, unable to have this without Skinner.

Inside again, not too deep, letting Mulder breathe his fill, going back to the rhythmic in and out that matched them so well. And another clip, and another pinch, and this time, Mulder shivered, the sensation shocking a path right through Mulder’s body to Skinner’s cock and up his spine.

He flicked at the clothespins, making them quiver and dance, making Mulder gasp a few times, until the numbness set in. Almost, Skinner told himself, be patient, just another few moments, of fucking, of touching, of staying at this undulating plateau and then—

Both hands reaching out, cock thrusting down, down, deeply inside, and ripping both clothespins off, the moment of sensation and agony shrieking through Mulder, into Skinner’s cock as the exquisiteness of Mulder’s reaction went through him.

Gentling now, soothing little circles, his fingertips rubbing so tenderly over the too-hot little nipples, the white marks gone so red, so very red. Not quite bruised, but another few weeks, and Mulder would be ready for that, too. More than ready for it. Begging for it. Begging for it the way Mulder had begged—eyes furious, cock hard, fear stuttering the words—for Skinner to indulge him in erotic asphyxiation.

Another thing that scared the hell out of Skinner when he thought of Mulder doing this without him.

It was only because he wanted it to last that he eventually pulled out of Mulder’s mouth, and resisted the pleading tongue tip flickering at the slit of his cock. “Stop it,” he said, still needing to slide



out of Mulder's reach. For that playful impertinence, the last greedy lick was repaid, of course, with an equally playful—and equally arousing—stinging slap to Mulder's flank, and then, for the pleasure of it, short, hard, flicking slaps at Mulder's nipples, the briefest hottest contact of nubbed flesh against the smooth palm of his hand, and the delicious hissed-in breath that syncopated to the rhythm of his slaps.

Down now, farther down, pinching and twisting whatever took his fancy, flesh firm and skin soft, delicate between his teeth, Mulder wriggling and squirming under him, Mulder's cock brushing against him, the damp edge of a wave lapping at the shore.

Mulder's balls were tight and shiny, dark, plum dark, and as sweetly sharp against his tongue. He nipped at them, barely catching them with the edge of his teeth, but he knew what that did to Mulder, the fantasies and fears, and that added something, whatever it was, that made even this pretense of castrative threat so exciting to Mulder, making Mulder so eager to push up against his teeth.

He took Mulder in his mouth, not swallowing him all the way down, Mulder too long to do that comfortably, but his hand was a white-knuckled tunnel for Mulder's cock, and his mouth a sharp-toothed cave, the smooth edges of his teeth dragging lightly over the bas relief of Mulder's cock, harder over the veins, barely touching the smooth dips in between, but there, just there at the most sensitive part, right behind the head, his teeth catching on the flange, staying there for a moment, while he listened to Mulder's chanted praise and felt Mulder's pulse race against his tongue.

And now, scraping his teeth over the head of Mulder's cock, biting down just enough, enough for his own pleasure, far more than he could ever imagine tolerating against his own cock, but there it was again: Mulder's reaction, a long low moan, and a desperate, "Please!" the sexiest, lowest murmur, a begging incantation, a mantra pleading for more, and harder.

He held Mulder delicately between his teeth, difficult to do, with Mulder writhing under him like this.

He let go long enough to snarl, "Keep still!" then took just the head of Mulder's cock back into his mouth. So potent, to feel the slender head held there at his mercy, to feel Mulder's quivering attempts to stay still, to hear Mulder begging him

again and again. He snarled his teeth sharply over the flange, heard Mulder's half-shrieked shout, and jammed two fingers up Mulder's ass, blunt assault and tight pleasure, Mulder more than ready for him there, open sesame, the magic of Mulder belonging to him.

And not quite unexpectedly: the spurt of fluid into his mouth, gouts of it, evidence and proof that Mulder hadn't so much as touched himself for several days. He knew what Mulder was feeling, his own experiences and Mulder's words reverberating through him, Mulder's cum shooting into him as Mulder's voice poured over him, raggedly telling him of exploding inwards as much as outwards.

He waited out Mulder's pleasure, holding Mulder in his mouth, in his hands, fucking with his fingers and sucking, hard, too hard for his own preference, until there was nothing, bar the soft sounds of Mulder asking him to stop.

Too sensitive after coming, Skinner knew, but no permission had been given, and Mulder knew better.

"Sorry, sir," he heard, and wondered if anyone else ever heard such sincere apology from Mulder.

"Mostly my fault, I should've held you back," he said, left hand still stroking Mulder's cock, Mulder wincing with every fisted stroke but not trying to pull away, not even when Skinner unstrapped the leather from around his cock and balls. "But you still know better. You had permission to speak, you should've told me. Because you know better."

"Yes, sir," Mulder told him, his gaze very soft, astonishingly open. "It's just..." A slow smile, suffusing Mulder's face. "No excuses, sir," he said, "I didn't have your permission, and I'm sorry."

And then Mulder's gaze went back to the heavy black belt lying on the bed beside them, and his smile was very nearly an outright grin. "I guess I've been a bad boy."

"You think," Skinner said, punctuating his words with nips and bites and strokes of Mulder's cock and balls, "that I'm going to give you what you want for disobeying me?"

"Have to admit—" a hastily added "sir" as Skinner threatened to let Mulder go, "that it was worth a try."

"Brat," Skinner told him, giving Mulder one light slap across the face, smiling as Mulder's face lit up and then fell as Skinner picked up the belt and dropped it over the side of the bed, "you



couldn't've stopped yourself from coming if Scully herself had walked in."

Damn. Wrong words; shadows racing into Mulder's eyes with the suddenness and darkness of a summer storm.

Still, Mulder was trying hard, coping better now than when they'd first started all of this. There was even an assay at a smile, enough to make Skinner feel a hard knot of pride in his chest, as Mulder tried so very hard not to ruin things: "You're right, sir. I couldn't have stopped. Not even if my mother," a sudden hard swallow, but then Mulder was meeting his gaze again, forcing the shadows back where they belonged, forgotten, "had walked in. You—"

Mulder looking away, words skittering to a stop, the truth left hidden. Skinner let go of Mulder, stretched out over him, covering him, a camouflage canopy so the world couldn't see the man beneath him and a heavy, protective weight anchoring Mulder to him, to what they were together. "I what?"

Voice gone rusty, and Mulder still not meeting his eyes. "You...you know me."

A quick bite at Mulder's left nipple, reward and punishment combined.

Words almost too quiet to hear, Skinner leaning down to capture them as they slid from Mulder's mouth. "And you're not afraid of what I am."

No, Skinner wasn't afraid of what Mulder was. But Mulder was. Always had been. Or at least since puberty appeared just as his sister disappeared. "There's nothing to fear," Skinner said, and Mulder shrugged. Skinner let his upper body drop down the last few inches until he lay completely atop Mulder, muscle to muscle, bone to bone, Mulder's heart beating against his chest. Reached up, took Mulder's chin in one hand, forced the man to face him. "There's nothing to fear. Not in you."

Mulder looking at him for a long moment, eyes masking whatever Mulder was thinking. Finally: "Not in you either."

He nearly smiled, killed it just in time: it was kind, even sweet of Mulder to offer reassurance, even if Skinner hadn't needed that particular reassurance in fifteen years. "Thank you," he said, giving Mulder this, kissing him gently, letting the affection show and letting Mulder retreat, just a little, after having faced another of those painful, shame-filled secrets.

He indulged them both with kissing for a while,

releasing Mulder's arms for Mulder's sake and to feel them around himself. Nearly leisurely, savoring this, he held Mulder and kissed him, pouring himself into Mulder, taking back what he wanted, rubbing his body languorously against Mulder's softened cock and hard chest.

Arousal curving up to critical mass, until this wasn't enough and he needed more. Mulder wasn't anywhere near recovery, but that hardly mattered. Skinner played with Mulder's tits again, pulling at the nipples hard enough that Mulder's pecs stretched out away from the flat wall of his chest, and Mulder's eyes closed, locking him away in that un-enterable room where this actually felt good. It sure as hell felt good to do it, to look at it, to feel the power of it, and Skinner's cock reacted with enthusiasm, pushing him for more, for more now. He lifted Mulder's legs up, exposing him, soft hair surrounding softer hole, so tender inside, inviting.

Tempting, to just fuck Mulder, but he was enjoying this simmering arousal, reining it in, controlling himself as much as Mulder. Most of all, though, he admitted, broad thumb sliding in and out of Mulder's ass, it was making this last as long as possible.

He let Mulder go, and it soothed him inside, to see the way Mulder lay there, sated, pliant, willing—trusting. Depending on him, glad there was someone else willing and able to shoulder the burden.

It made Skinner feel...well, there was little enough protection he could provide for Mulder these days; these moments were all the more precious for that.

"I've got you," he said, not caring that it was probably a *non sequitur* for Mulder; saw Mulder's understanding or simple happiness in the smile he was given. He leaned over Mulder, close enough that Mulder stretched up, kissed his nipple, stayed there, when Skinner looped his arm around the back of Mulder's neck and held him there, held him hard, so that Mulder could suck on him.

Low thrum of pleasure drifting through him, a gentle escalation of desire, until he finally withdrew, a small push making Mulder lie down again. He went back to what he'd started, lighting the white candles, letting Mulder see what he was doing. White candles first, and then the red, taking his time, hearing Mulder's breath come faster in anticipation of what was coming next. Or maybe anticipation was the wrong word: this wasn't exactly Mulder's favorite.



Still, the white wax poured down in a beautiful pattern, thin streams of it flowing over Mulder's chest like come. Thin, thin streams, filaments, a spider's web of wax, slowly congealing and cooling, covering Mulder's chest. Nipples, now, Mulder gasping and squirming, pulling away, until Skinner had to take Mulder's hands and close them around the spars at the top of the bed.

Nipples again, the small brown tips covered with translucent white, the hardening wax opaquing until nothing else could be seen but the melted peak, a snowcap dripping down. Mulder was squirming again, just a taste of what was yet to come. The red candles had burned for long enough, now, small pools of melted wax dappled by the burning wick, the red dropping slowly onto the white, a libation of pain and prettiness, each dot and dash leaving its message on Mulder's skin. Hotter, this red wax, much hotter against the skin than the white, and yes, as the intensity increased, so did Mulder's twistings and wriggings, and there, under the stoicism that made Mulder strong enough to endure this despite it not being it his own peccadillo, was the appreciation of the burning beads of pain.

Skinner paused for a moment, listening to Mulder's gasps and hurried breathing, looking at the way the red melted the white, running them together into pink, and elsewhere, the red discrete droplets, patterning Mulder's skin.

Yes.

His mark all over Mulder, there, and there, and of course, here: he took his time, waiting for Mulder to be watching, waiting for Mulder's eyes to be on him, on his hands, on what he held in his hands, on what he was doing.

There it was: Mulder looking at him, and a deep, deep inhalation, shoulder muscles tensing so hard, arms holding on so tightly, but still Skinner waited. There was more to be had from Mulder in this. Much more, anticipation a champagne tingle through his cock. He didn't require Mulder's permission to do this, but he wanted it. Not to salve his own conscience, but because of what it meant for Mulder to agree to this, to something Mulder didn't enjoy, something he loathed, something that was irrefutably for Skinner's pleasure only and at Mulder's cost.

Mulder's neck straining so that he could still see, and then, finally, that tense, tight little nod.

A surge of pleasure through Skinner, and then

he poured the red, hot wax slowly, the cock in his hand jerking as Mulder's body spasmed as the molten thickness coated him. And there it was, the rest of what made this so much of what Skinner wanted: Mulder easing into the pain, hard work rewarded by a long hot soak, muscles relaxing, head tilting back, throat exposed, and the howl of pain shifted, altered as it only could with a man like Mulder: still pained, but imbued with such deep satisfaction, such deep appreciation, such...

Such was the stuff of which arousal was woven, Skinner's hand firm on his own cock, stroking himself because how could he not, with Mulder lying there, like that, decorated by Skinner's will, and awash in an endorphin high. All of it, all the elements combined, made Mulder even more beautiful to him. He touched Mulder's cock, the wax so very warm against his fingertips, and tenderness threatened to overcome him as Mulder juddered and whimpered, just once.

Quite gently, Skinner peeled dried petals of wax from Mulder's body, leaving his cock alone, encased in its cocoon of red wax. Each petal plucked a whimper from Mulder, and a smile, triumph edging into Mulder's eyes as Skinner looked down at his cock, and could see the proof of the pain he had conquered.

"Maybe one of these days you'll get to like that," Skinner said, flicking his thumbnail sharply over Mulder's left nipple.

"God, I doubt it. But it feels so good when it hurts so bad—"

"You," Skinner informed him, four fingers shoving uninvited into Mulder's mouth, "sound like a bad song."

Mulder's eyes laughed up at him, and Mulder's tongue caressed his palm, tickling him, stopping only when he started to pull his hand free.

"I'm feeling indulgent," he told Mulder, fucking his face with his hand, "tell me what you want. I might give it to you."

He pulled out of Mulder then, stroking Mulder's face, waiting while Mulder actually thought about the offer. Skinner stared, fascinated; intrigued to see which of the many needs Mulder would bring out into the open tonight.

"I want to be gagged and bound."

Skinner was up off the bed before Mulder had even finished speaking.

"Sir, please—!"

"Goddamn—" Running his hand over the top of



his head, taking his glasses off, pinching the bridge of his nose, putting his glasses back on. Giving himself time to get his flare of temper damped down again, anger having no place in here. "Shit, I've told you. I'm not doing that to you until you're ready."

"But I am ready! I—"

"I said no."

"But sir—"

"Listen to me," he said, coming back to the bed, sitting astride Mulder, pressing down with his weight, physical reminder of less tangible power. "You think you're ready, but believe me, you're not. Stop and think for one second. What will it bring back to you if I bind you? If I tied you down?"

Skinner actually admired that stubborn set to Mulder's mouth, that display of strength that was part of what made the surrender so much sweeter and what made Mulder tilt at windmills.

"It doesn't conjure my dad up if you hit me with the belt so—"

"That's different. That's in the past, that's not sexual. But you've told me about your nightmares and what happened when you got trapped in that computer."

Even the reminder of being tied down and amputated by buxom blonde porn-video nurses brought no concession from Mulder, that mouth setting into ever more stubborn lines.

"You've been committed," pained himself by what he'd had to do to Mulder that time, "you've had Scully—" no need to mention Mulder's less than platonic thoughts of his partner, "tie you down and walk away from you. You're not ready."

"I am—"

He leaned down, until he was breathing in Mulder's face, until Mulder was taking all of his weight on him, Mulder's breath short little pants. "I have seen your reaction to just getting tangled in your shirt."

Mulder's gaze flickered uneasily, guiltily, under his, and Skinner gave him not an inch. "I'm not going to argue with you, so let me put it another way. I'm not doing it."

Mulder struggled under him, pushing up, trying to kick him off, hands pushing at his chest. Skinner didn't budge, just settled himself more heavily and almost lazily took Mulder's wrists in his hands and held him. Just held him, for a long time.

No more struggles under him, just Mulder's unsteady breathing.

"Are we done?" Skinner asked.

A longish pause, then: "I am."

Resentment still in those eyes, nearly brown in the skittering candlelight. "When I decide you're ready," Skinner repeated, pressing Mulder's arms up over his head, pressing them down flat into the bed. "And when I feel like it."

Another flash of resentment, but was that gratitude hiding behind it like a poor relative? Skinner stroked Mulder's skin, dislodging little buttons of hardened wax, giving himself a few moments to think. Then he reached over the side of the bed, fishing around for the belt. No way was he going to let Mulder push him into doing something he didn't want to do, but if Mulder needed to push himself, if Mulder needed to stretch his limits, to assert his manliness or strength or endurance or suffering, whichever precise combination it was this time, then there were other ways to do that. Many other ways, and all of them pleasurable. On one side, anyway.

He stopped Mulder's instinctive move to roll over onto his belly. "Not yet," he said, and this time, it was a tease, gifting Mulder with his continued approval, his unshakable affections. "I'll get to *that* when I'm good and ready."

Skinner draped the belt across Mulder's face, covering Mulder's mouth with heavy leather and light control, a taste of what Mulder was so sure he wanted, and even so little fluttered a wing of panic across Mulder's eyes for a moment. Slowly then, pleasantly, his own gaze not letting Mulder look away, Skinner flicked and picked and plucked the wax from Mulder's body, little jerks and gasps and sighs greeting his efforts, until the panic was gone, and hunger was back. The skin under Skinner's hands was nearly bare now, the wax pulling unwillingly free of Mulder's pubic hair, then Skinner's fingers were on Mulder's cock, on the wax constricting there, dried tight and hard. He wrapped his hands around Mulder's cock, relishing the odd feel of it, a waxen, living dildo. Then: Mulder's near groan, and the begging spread of Mulder's legs opening for him, as he peeled the thick wax from Mulder's cock. Underneath, the skin so bare, the texture altered, only a fraction, only for a few moments, from its hot sheathing. "Nice," he murmured, catching sight of the pride and pleasure in Mulder's eyes. "Very nice," he said again, stroking. "Real nice," he said, bending down, drawing the words out like taffy, then licking,



unhurriedly, at the head of Mulder's cock. He sucked Mulder in, enough to fill his mouth, nowhere near enough to gag on, this never having been one of his skills. He was, he confessed, as his mouth molded itself around Mulder's heat, working on it now that he had such incentive.

Mulder was squirming again, his cock still pretty soft, not a chance of a solid hard-on, not yet, not after the orgasm he'd given Mulder, but still, it felt potent, rich, in his mouth, Mulder's taste slowly coming through and conquering the remnants of the wax. Skinner pulled back, rubbed his finger across the tip of Mulder's cock, used both thumbs to spread the little hole as wide as it could go.

He leaned down again, and licked, pressing his tongue against Mulder's cock, shifting suddenly, very nearly shocked by the bolt of pleasure shooting through him as he did this. He pressed his own cock against Mulder's legs, pushing himself back and forth against the caressing hairs. He pointed his tongue, knowing full well he wasn't getting inside Mulder, but still, the thought of that, the concept, the—Skinner groaned, shoved Mulder's legs up over his shoulders abruptly, snarled "hold on" and gave another push until Mulder grabbed his own legs behind the knees and everything was up and out of Skinner's way. The small brown hole, now, the hair there already wet from Skinner's recent attentions, and Skinner took a good long look at it, fingers stroking it, before he took his glasses off. He pressed his face hard against Mulder, his tongue able to push inside here, inside this darkness, this core of Mulder's being. It never failed to thrill him, being like this, doing this to Mulder, knowing he was the only person Mulder would or could let do this to him, the only person who dared. Or cared enough. He thrust his tongue inside, tasting how slick Mulder was from the lubricant, taking an intimacy that still, occasionally, gave Mulder pause.

His cock wanted more, and as he sucked on Mulder's ass, then pushed his fingers inside, he was tempted to just fuck Mulder. Fuck him and come, then see what he felt like doing later.

But it had been so long. Too damned long.

He could fuck Mulder any time, half-an-hour, fifteen minutes, hell, once they'd barely needed five minutes—breathe deeply, back up, back off, get control—up against a door only just closed against the rest of the world. But this...there was never

enough time for this, never enough opportunities; wouldn't be, until the world changed and they could live together.

Pigs would fly backwards before that happened.

He pushed the regret away, told himself, again, that it didn't matter.

He eased Mulder's legs down, kissing and licking his way up Mulder's long body, until he eased himself completely on top of Mulder, kissed him easily, gently, with all the emotion in the world, then rolled Mulder over, luxuriating in the deep chuckle, and the "about fucking time, sir" half-muffled by the pillow.

The iridescence of candlelight didn't help his vision any, Mulder a white blur on the bed, darker blurs denoting hair, and sort of, facial features. Skinner reached for his glasses, wanting to see all of this clearly.

Contemplatively, he trailed the belt across Mulder, watching the heavy leather follow the furrows and plateaus of Mulder's back, ass, thighs. Those long legs spread immediately, of course, Mulder's hands stretching out to grab onto the bedposts, Mulder's shoulder muscles tensing in anticipation.

Skinner stood up, hefted the belt in his right hand.

Raised his arm, felt the way his muscles flexed, watched the way the muscles flexed in Mulder's ass; heard the whistle of leather through air, felt the snap against flesh, heard the crack against skin. Perfect, incandescent moments frozen in time: Mulder's gasp, and the jolt of his body, every last inch responding; the movement of his own arm, his upper body, the twist of his hips and lower back, the way he shifted his weight to bring just the right amount of force into the slice of the belt through the air and down onto Mulder.

Oh yes. This was worth postponing a fuck for.

His cock was so heavy, so hard, standing out from his body, swaying with the movements of his arm. He raised his arm again, and again, the power of his arm, the strength of his blows, the sweetness of Mulder's low murmured sounds of satisfaction and pain sending satisfaction and pleasure pounding through his own veins, hotter than blood.

Skin turning red, such a pretty pattern, such a lovely criss-crossing of marks, leaving his mark, putting his own X onto Mulder.

His cock leaked its demands, glistening in the candlelight.



“On your back,” he said, nearly surprising himself with the raw desire in his voice.

“Yes, sir,” Mulder responded, hoarse, gasping, rolling over to reveal the beginnings of another erection.

“Lift your legs up.”

Immediate response, both in action and in expression, Mulder smiling at him, no shadows now, just that serene contentment, and Skinner felt that settle in his bones, this balance and rightness between them.

Before him, Mulder lay exposed, cock and balls right there where he could do untold damage, and asshole pulled slightly open as Mulder hooked his arms around his knees again.

It was all a matrix of desire and fulfillment: the power of his arm, raised up, belt trailing benignly along his own skin, the redness of Mulder’s ass, the white of his groin, and the absolute vulnerability of cock and balls, and even more so, of eyes. Open, honest, saying more than any words could, even tonight, with Mulder so uncommonly silent. Skinner stood there for a moment, and then his muscles were moving with easy force; the hiss of air, the crack of belt, and the high-pitched shriek from Mulder.

Perfection.

Skinner raised his arm again, letting the rhythm match the pulse of arousal in his cock, giving himself over to the passion of inflicting pleasure.

The belt came within a fraction of Mulder’s balls, Skinner licking his lips as he thought of the chill scurry of air stirring the hair on Mulder’s balls and up between his legs. Looking at, devouring, the sight of the black belt stropping Mulder’s ass, so red, so hot against his hand as he stroked his handiwork.

Oh yes. Definitely perfection.

Skinner slid two fingers into Mulder’s ass, muscle clenching around him, Mulder gazing at him, mouth parted, needing him, wanting him, loving him.

“God, you’re tight,” Skinner told him, just to see the pride and happiness in Mulder’s eyes. And because it was true, Mulder closing around his fingers, long cock tilting as Mulder tightened his muscles to hold onto Skinner’s fingers inside him.

That did it.

He had to get inside Mulder, get inside him right now, fuck him, fuck him so hard that when he came, Mulder would taste him on his tongue.

Skinner dropped the belt across Mulder’s nipples, climbed up onto the bed, kneeling between Mulder’s legs, pushing inside. All the way, one long, long thrust, just sinking into that heat, that moistness, Mulder so slick inside.

Yes, he thought, no other words, just yes, and the feeling of rightness, of absolute possession. Owing. And in owning, belonging. The two of them, no more, no less, combined, nothing between them, nothing to separate them, nothing to ever split them up. Mulder under him, ass red and hot against his thighs, Mulder’s legs held out of the way, belly and cock exposed, vulnerable, yes, but strong enough to take Skinner leaning on that belt, both hands, one over each nipple, pressing, twisting, flickers of pain sparkling through Mulder’s eyes, gilding the pleasure.

The aching need in Mulder’s voice was a pleasure to hear. “Oh, God, faster, please, faster—”

Skinner slowed his pace, controlling himself, controlling Mulder, fucking Mulder steady and hard, nice and slow, denying the breathless pleading. Drawing the pleasure out, holding it back, damming it up inside, until it spread out through his belly, little pinprick points of pleasure, visual—

Mulder’s eyes, staring at him, submitting to Skinner’s decision to take it slow—

Auditory—

The gasps and groans, and the sound of his cock sliding into Mulder, his balls slapping against Mulder’s tenderized ass—

Olfactory—

The sharp smell of sex in the air, the fecund smell of the candles, the masculine smell of sweat—

And then he let go, leaning up over Mulder, fucking hard, fast, needing more and more, needing it now, so close, so close, almost, almost—

Coming, inside, marking Mulder in there as much as he’d claimed him on the outside. Leaving himself inside, where he’d become a part of Mulder, inescapable, always there, a temporary permanence until there could be true permanence outside of this room.

He slid off to one side, cozily slapping Mulder’s hands out of the way, Mulder straightening out so that Skinner was comfortable. Eyes closed, Skinner smiled as Mulder muttered annoyedly as his cock slid free. “Enjoy that?” he asked, palming Mulder’s half-hard cock.

The response was Mulder pressing up against his hand. “Ready to go again, huh?” Skinner said



sleepily, squeezing Mulder's cock nice and hard, Mulder shuddering in pain, cock hardening in pleasure.

"Yeah," he heard, a wealth of desire and emotion coloring Mulder's voice.

After a moment, Skinner stirred, leaning up on one elbow, looking down at Mulder stretched out beside him, sacrificial, but no virgin. Skinner ran his fingers down Mulder's cock, across his balls, and down to the slick hole he'd just fucked. He could feel himself, liquid softness inside, and he rubbed Mulder's prostate, watching his strokes pulse through Mulder's cock.

He slid his fingers free, and got up from the bed, going round the room, blowing out candles.

Behind him, from the bed, he heard several half-words, snippets and snatches of phrases, everything abandoned almost immediately. Most of the candles were blown out by the time the muttering had stopped: all that remained were the cluster of candles on the night stand, casting a small glow over Mulder, those eyes glittering and dark.

But no rebellion in them.

None. A rueful spark to them, and a wry twist to the mouth, and a sulkily amused tone to the voice as Mulder once more grasped the bedposts, Skinner pleased by the comfortable submissiveness. "You know, being like this really sucks sometimes."

Skinner looked down at his own satiatedly limp cock. "Not for a while it won't," he said, taking the wipes from the drawer, cleaning himself off, lifting Mulder's legs up, resting them on his own broad shoulders this time, as he cleaned Mulder off too, chest, and ass, and cock. Little droplets and strings of red and white, the wax lingering here and there, and there was a deep redness crisscrossing Mulder's ass, turning it into an ambient heated pink. There were going to be bruises tomorrow, and for days to come, flaring to life every time Mulder sat down. Skinner traced the lines with his finger, touching Mulder tenderly, following every discrete mark amidst the general redness.

Looked up quickly, and saw only contentment and pleasure in Mulder's eyes. He gave Mulder's balls a quick, affectionate tug, kissed one swollen nipple, released Mulder's hands from the headboard. "I'm tired," he said, leaning over, turning the bedside lamp on at its lowest, dimmest setting—just enough to keep nightmares at bay—blowing out the last of the candles and taking his

glasses off. He settled onto his back, pulling Mulder around, arranging him the way he wanted him. "Go to sleep."

There was a long pause, then a single long, sliding thrust of nearly-hard cock against his leg, and an even longer, wetter, suckling at his right nipple. "You sure, sir?" that seductive voice asked.

There were things he hadn't done yet this weekend—or ever—with Mulder: things his hands and body and mind itched to do. But he was tired, and there had to be limits: when Mulder tried to erase those limits, that was when it was imperative to keep him in line. To keep him safely within prescribed limits, safely taken care of, safely controlled. He spanked Mulder once, very hard, across the upper slope of that reddened ass, watched as lust darkened Mulder's eyes and obedience returned.

He tucked Mulder's head down against his chest, dark hair soft against his nipple for a moment before Mulder's lips began to mouth him again, then slid his hand down Mulder's back, feeling the raised heat against his palm as he reached Mulder's ass. Pushed two fingers into Mulder's hole, held him like that for a moment, until Mulder was thrusting against his leg and back against his fingers.

"Hold that thought," he whispered, pulling his fingers free, resting his hand, splayed, across the ass he'd made so much warmer than the rest of Mulder's body. "Sleep," he added firmly, draping his other arm heavily across Mulder's shoulders, holding the other man in place while Mulder's hips still moved lightly against him. Held Mulder, as always, and waited, as always, until Mulder surrendered to his will.

Yes. There. The muscles across those shoulders unknotting, Mulder heavier against him, a gusting sigh damp across his nipple. "You're a bastard, you know, sir."

"Yep," he agreed, cheerfully, giving Mulder one last, affectionate slap on his ass. "And that's why you love me."

An unexpected rebellion, Mulder clambering free, until he was propped up and leaning over Skinner.

"No, that's not why I—not *all* of it. It's..."

Ah. So that's where all tonight's words had gone. Trapped behind that inarticulate shock, that nearly scared honesty.

"It's what?" he prompted, noticing out of the





corner of his eye that Mulder's erection was fading fast. "Go on, tell me."

"I—"

Mulder was not meeting his eyes. Skinner grabbed Mulder's chin, pulled him closer until there was no escape. "I said, tell me."

Shadows back in Mulder's eyes, Skinner refusing to let them win. The leather and the wax and the rest of the toys were useful, but they were, in the end, just props, symbols and symptoms of who they were. This is what was truly between them, this force of will, this force of domination, this balance between what he needed to give and what Mulder needed so desperately to take.

Very gently, while his eyes were implacable, his will immutable, Skinner whispered: "Say the words."

A very long moment, many, many, many heartbeats, his own slow and steady, Mulder's jackhammer fast, and then Mulder licked his lower lip, courage gathering in his eyes.

Losing it, glancing away, and Skinner brought his other hand up, around the back of Mulder's neck, a small show of strength, a small symbol of what was between them, the least possible measure to give Mulder excuse enough to yield.

Trembling, as if admitting something terrible. "I love you."

Hell, in Mulder's books and movies the tops were always grim and dour, but Skinner grinned, his whole face lighting up in sheer delight: this—*this*—had been at least a part of Mulder's nervousness tonight, and Mulder's quiescence. "Yes," he said, simply pulling Mulder down in close, holding him very tightly, "I know."

Then, as Mulder's heart pounded against Skinner's chest, Skinner went on, saying the words flat out, no room for misunderstandings or insecurity's twisting distortions, hammering home this truth for the first of many, many times: "And I'm still not going to leave. I'm not going to let anyone kill me. I'm not going to be driven away."

A tentative hand, creeping up to rest against Skinner's chest, moving cautiously higher, up to Skinner's shoulder. "I'm not going to hold it against you, I'm not going to use it as a weapon to

hurt you and I sure as hell don't need it to control you, do I?"

"No," followed by a small kiss pressed longingly against his chest.

"It's not a surprise for me," Skinner said, spreading his legs, letting Mulder slide between them, then wrapping himself even more tightly around him. "So if I haven't quit on you already, I'm not going to. Am I?"

Face rubbed against him, hand snaking up to hold onto the back of his neck, shamelessly cuddling.

A shock of sound, Mulder yelping at the hard, unexpected smack to his ass. "I asked you a question," Skinner said. "Am I going to quit on you?"

Another long pause, Skinner waiting this out too.

Finally, certain as sunrise: "No. No, you're not going to quit on me."

"Good. Now go to sleep. I'm not going anywhere, and neither are you."

Comfortable, warm, nearly asleep, a small nudge in the back of his mind stirring him just enough to make him register Mulder's tension and divine the source. "And yeah, that means I *do* reciprocate, so don't even try to beat yourself with this. I'm the only one who gets to do that now," a fondly effective smack to Mulder's ass, "and don't you forget it."

"Damn, I knew I should've planted bugs in this place."

"I'll give it to you in writing," Skinner growled, squeezing Mulder almost too tightly.

"Holy decoder ring, Batman—in secret code so nobody else can figure it out?"

"What the hell else do you think we've been doing all night?"

There was a deep chuckle against him, Mulder's laughter warm and bright, Mulder relaxing heavily into Skinner's encircling body.

"Good," Skinner said, settling himself into complete comfort, "now stop thinking and get to sleep."

And, of course, in this, if nowhere else, Mulder obeyed him.



The Ice Queen Cometh

The original title of this was “Saving [a friend’s] life”: if certain things didn’t happen, my poor friend would be forced—just *forced*—to write something involving Scully. So rather than consign her to a fate worse than death, I wrote this (and yes, the fate worse than death reference is a *joke*).



She raised her head to look at the numbers marking the passing floors and winced, the tense muscles in her neck and back complaining at her. A bath, as soon as she got home tonight. A long, hot, bubble bath—the imported English Damask Rose her mom had given her—switch the phone off, just lie there in the heat and let the tension soak away.

The minute she got home. Definitely.

In the meantime, she had to leave this report for Skinner, or with Skinner, if even he was still here this late on a Friday night.

The elevator pinged, and she stepped out, the corridor deserted, the subdued, apologetic hush of a busy building almost empty of people. No Kimberly, of course, and the door to Skinner’s inner office was closed. She knocked, heard something that could have been one of Skinner’s permissions to enter, and walked in. Oh. Not Skinner.

“Can I help you, miss?” the man asked her.

Not even ma’am, but miss. Gun in the small of her back, shield in her pocket, ID pinned to her jacket, and she was still ‘miss.’ “No, thank you,” she said, and didn’t even bother to care that she sounded cold. She hesitated for a moment, considering the wisdom of leaving the report on Skinner’s desk. Nothing secret in there, and even the cleaning crews had a certain level of security clearance, but still, the crime-scene photographs weren’t something she’d want left lying around, not if—God forbid—this had been done to her family. What was left of it.

She sighed, heavily, and made a face at her own melodrama, sighed again when the cleaner thought it was directed at him. It wasn’t even worth trying to explain—tired as she was, she’d display all the tact of Mulder in full flight. She closed the door quietly, headed back, once more, for the elevator.



Ten more minutes, she told herself, just ten more minutes and then she'd be on her way home, to a long, hot, bubble bath, light a few scented candles, perhaps—

The elevator pinging roused her, her heels making no sound on the carpeted hallway, her feet aching all the way up to her knees. At least she was almost done, another few minutes, just lock the desk drawer, leave a message for Mulder—

And if he called in tonight and heard a voicemail from her about the report, he'd drag himself in no matter how badly he felt. And she was not—not a chance—going to fire up her computer and send him an email. They'd been gone eleven, nearly twelve days; the thought of that much accumulated email put mere liver-eating hibernating men into perspective.

She grabbed her purse from her bottom drawer, her coat from the stand, looked around one more time. Desktop clear, she had everything she needed in her briefcase, nothing in here that she was going to need over the next three days.

Good. One step closer to that bath.

Nice to know she wasn't the only person still working this late, the elevator taking its time to get to her floor. So all she had to do now was leave a note on Mulder's desk, and that would be it. Home, bath, a good night's sleep—at last—throw a few things in a bag, rent a car, hit the road. South this time—see if she couldn't avoid unstable kids and weird dolls. Three days, in a convertible, heading south...

Her tattoo itched. Metaphorically, of course, the tattoo just a symbol of the second to last time she'd hit the road in this mood. Just a symbol. Just a reminder. A warning.

A hint, a suggestion, a temptation.

She scratched, firmly, pressed the button for "basement" and ran through her mental list again. Dry cleaning and car, she'd pick those up tomorrow. Car was already reserved, she'd picked up cash at the airport ATM on their way in tonight, the report was finished, Mulder was patched up, dropped off safely at home with two Tylenol 3 and Chinese takeout.

And his gun was with Ballistics, for the usual tests after an agent-involved shooting death, and his eyes had been so dark, more haunted than usual, almost as bad as the time the damn fool son of a bitch idiot had holes drilled in his head—she put her cell phone back in her purse, snicking it firmly shut.

No. She was not his mother, she was not Mrs. Spooky and anyway, he should be asleep by now. Needed to be asleep.

He'd be fine without her, he would, she told herself, doubt gnawing away at her. She'd left the painkillers, he still had some muscle relaxants left from last time; she'd given him a prescription for more painkillers if he needed them tomorrow, he just needed some rest, some downtime, a breathing space. Without her. Without the job, without everything. That's what he needed.

Or it was what she needed. Three days away from all of this. And she stared morosely at the elevator doors opening on the dingy basement hallway. Three days of being herself, not Mrs. Spooky, not Mulder's sensible partner, not 'that red-haired woman with the nutsoid FBI guy' as the locals had been calling her. Three days of thinking about herself, not Mulder; taking care of herself, not Mulder; doing what she wanted, not what—dammit, she'd promised herself she wasn't going to blame Mulder for this. Just because she felt herself disappearing into his shadow—well, that's what this weekend was for. Getting back into some light of her own. And Mulder would be fine, and she needed to stop thinking about him. Leave him the damned note for tomorrow, and get the hell out of here. Think about the bath, and tomorrow, the freedom of the road...

She unlocked Mulder's office door, reached automatically for the light switch and realized: the light was on. The office wasn't empty. And Mulder wasn't alone.

"Mulder—" the accusation out of her mouth before her brain recognized what her eyes were seeing.

Not just Mulder disobeying doctor's orders and her sound advice, but Mulder sitting in his chair, tie undone, top buttons undone, and—

Skinner, standing behind Mulder, massaging Mulder's neck, or shoulders, up in that region anyway.

And in the smallest second before anyone could say anything, her mind clicked onto something else: the door had been locked. They'd been in here, door locked, Skinner's hands on Mulder—

"Mulder?"

He was already looking at her. And Skinner hadn't moved away from him. Hadn't let go of him—but—but—standard behavior, the way people usually reacted in these situations—this wasn't—





Skinner's hands were moving again, and she stared, fascinated, her mind slipping from over the speed limit down to a rubbernecking crawl.

A long second, this time, long enough to see Skinner's hands flex and relax, gathering up Mulder's shirt, tugging at it.

No. Deny everything was Mulder's line. See it. Call it for what it was. Skinner's hands, big hands, squeezing Mulder's chest through the limp shirt, Mulder's nipples showing—

She stumbled over the words. She didn't think of these words with Mulder. Couldn't risk thinking that, about Mulder. But—

Mulder's nipples were showing...hard.

Erect.

She looked up, into his eyes.

Waited for him to say something, for Skinner to say something, to make this just another Mulder aberration that could be ignored. An anomaly, a singularity in the space-time continuum of Fox Mulder: The New Voyages.

Mulder reached his hand out to her, and Skinner reached his hands down onto Mulder, time stretching out, sweet and clinging as melted taffy, Mulder finally speaking.

"Stay," she heard him say.

Stay.

How could she—how could he—

Time speeding up again, Skinner's face, Skinner's hands, Mulder's shirt, bare skin showing,

Mulder's eyes, oh God, Mulder's eyes, and Mulder saying it again—

"Stay."

Don't—

"Please, Scully, stay."

Oh, please, no, don't ask, don't suggest, this was supposed to happen hundreds of miles away with a stranger, not here, with Mulder. And Skinner. Big hands, stroking Mulder's hair, Mulder's face, Mulder leaning into it, mouth open, leaning back against Skinner, one hand reaching out to her—

Touching, being touched—

Mulder's face naked and bare, showing everything, a black hole of hunger and feast, inviting her, wanting her, welcoming, no end to it—

She saw it in his eyes, heard it in his voice.

"Scully, please—"

The door slamming behind her, her shoes clacking loudly on the floor, tap tap tap so close together, because she was running. Running and running and running. To a rented car, and a trip south, or north, just away.

Far away.

From Mulder, and Skinner, and touching.

The roar of the car starting, and she ran through her mental list again. Car, clothes, pack in the morning. Tonight, a long, hot bubble bath.

And thinking, about Mulder, and Skinner.

And need.



Kill File

On a list to which I was briefly a member, there was talk about the trailer/spoilers for Kill Switch and Mulder being tortured. The challenge came down to write something that was Mulder's worse nightmare, which I thought just might go something like this...

Mouth dry. Palms damp. Wetness running down the insides of his legs. Soles of his feet dry. Cold. The wetness on his legs going from hot to warm to cold, irritating his skin, itchy—



No fingers to scratch.

No fingers.

No hands.

His eyes were open, but he was blind.

He sucked in air, screamed out panic.

Silence.

He screamed, and screamed again: throat hurting, vibration of sound trickling up his Eustachian tubes into his ears, air passing over wet tongue and dry lips.

In silence.

He moved his legs: moved his feet, no more than eight or nine inches' range. Something hard and smooth under his feet, nothing against his legs or his back, apart from the snaking coolness of...wires? He twisted, struggling in Stygian dark, pain blossoming bright.

But at least now he knew where his hands were.

Cold draft along his ribs, curving along his armpits, sliding up his arms to end, serrated, in heated pain.

His hands were confined somewhere over his head: he just hoped they were still attached to his arms. Numb, to the elbows.

He'd been here a long time.

Long enough to piss himself. Long enough to scream himself hoarse.

Long enough for whoever had him to cut off sight and sound and smell.

He twisted again, as much as he could; felt something pressed between upper arm and face.



A helmet? Too thick for a hood.
 Kind of like the practice helmets used for boxing. Rubbed again, cat in the dark: not a practice helmet, not with those wires serpentine down his neck, swaying with his movements.
 And something he'd been trying not to notice. Naked. He was naked, swinging in the wind, cock shriveled with cold.
 Blind, deaf, naked, and without the faintest idea of how the hell he'd ended up here.
 Going to sleep on his couch, waking up to this. Scully and Skinner must be competing to see who could hide their frantic worry behind the gruffest mad-as-hell glower.
 Light—
 But he wasn't seeing it.
 Another spark—
 Gone before he could catch it.
 Will-o'-the-wisp, here, there, gone, there, here—
 He could feel the light, sharp firework spark against his hip. Not as sharp, there, in his mind. Thoughts flickering brightly, flaring and dying and sparkling and—
 Something, there, in the back of his mind, off to the left. Small, but clear, like the picture in the bubbles of a Disney movie. What the hell was it?
 He circled round, getting closer.
 Memory? Sight?
 He could hear it now, this picture. Voices, low, careful, so very cautious.
 Huh. No gruff, mad-as-hell.
 Just soft, gentle voices, worried.
 Click, thrum, hiss: he knew that sound.
 Ventilator. And the beep of a heart monitor, and he could hear the drip drip drip of the IV, the shush-ing whisper of Scully's clothes, the tick of Skinner's watch.
 From above. Floating near the ceiling, his very own near-death experience. He looked around for Skinner's Hag, but she seemed to be into monogamy. Smart idea in this day and age, his blood so dark as it plopped thickly from the IV bag down the tube and into his arm.
 He gathered himself, deliberately, pushed at his... essence? Soul? Spirit? Astral body? Whatever he was, he pushed at it, made himself focus enough to look, at Scully, at Skinner. Sitting side by side in blue plastic chairs at his bedside, low-voiced murmurs barely audible over the push and hiss of the ventilator.
 Mulder thought himself heavier, floated lower until he could see the redness in Scully's eyes, the evidence of tears held sternly at bay.

Cry, he wanted to tell her. Go ahead, let yourself cry. I'm dying, Scully, can't you cry over me?
 But she blinked, hard. And reached one small hand out to Skinner. Small pale hand disappearing into large tan hand. Large tan hand folding closed, tenderly, over the small hand.
 Mulder looked at that for a long time.
 Kept on looking at it even while the voices whispered and required his attention. He didn't want to hear. He didn't want to know. But they wouldn't be ignored. Wouldn't. Buzzing round his head like bees, bzz, bzz, bzz, bzzzy to realize he was in trouble, Scully was saying. And Skinner murmuring that it wasn't her fault, they'd all been too busy to notice.
 Skinner didn't murmur. Skinner said and spoke and told and growled and snarled. He didn't murmur. And he didn't stroke his fingers across Scully's hand.
 No. Skinner did not do that.
 But he did, Mulder's eyes told him. Look. Just look. Weightlessness caught him, drifted him, thistle-down, up to the ceiling, oozing him through the banal acoustic tile, towards the Light.
 No. He wanted to see. Skinner, stroking Scully's hand...
 Do you think he ever suspected? Scully was whispering, looking up into Skinner's eyes.
 No, from Skinner, still murmuring, still stroking Scully's hand. Even if he did, Dana—
 That was wrong. Skinner would never call Scully 'Dana'—but Skinner did, and had, and the only reason Mulder knew was that Mulder wasn't really there. Mulder was supposed to be lying trapped in that body—
 Broken. Horrible damage, gunshots to his body, as if some sick bastard had drawn a pentagram with bullets then decorated him with serpents of plastic tubing. White gauze with red blossoms, limbs limp and spread and too still. Him. That was him, fettered to the bed with safety straps and needles that burned. That was his butchered naked body lying there, small cloth covering his genitals, a yellow tube snaking out from beneath the white towel, drip drip drip into a bottle.
 He was lying there like that, and Skinner was big and strong and tanned in his dark coat and white shirt.
 And Scully was so small, in her navy blue suit, her sensible shoes on her little feet. Little feet that didn't quite reach the floor.





Little hands being held in Skinner's hands. Mulder raised his own hands, looked at them, even while his body lay there, the blue ventilator raising and lowering his chest.

Blue eyes looking up—how many times had he seen those eyes raised up to him like that—into Skinner's eyes. Mouth, red-lipsticked, parted. Teeth glinting white. Skinner's shoulders so broad and dammit, that was a goddamned real smile, withheld for all these years, everyone knew Skinner didn't smile—

No. No. No, he screamed, silent, while the machines bipped and beeped and hissed. NOOOOO...

But yes. Skinner did. Scully did. Lips meeting, Scully enveloped by Skinner, fitting him as if...as if...as if...this was old, familiar, comfortable.

But what if he realized? Scully was asking.

He didn't, Skinner, voice so deep, light so warm on the sun-kissed skin. He couldn't know, Dana, we were too careful.

But he knew now.

Knew it as Skinner kissed Scully again, one hand cupping her ass, one hand cupping her breast. Her hand on Skinner's ass, her hand cupping Skinner's crotch.

Rubbing. Both of them rubbing and stroking, having sex—

While the ventilators thrummed and wheezed and clicked.

No—

Mulder thought it at the same second Skinner said it.

We can't. Not here.

Not while he's lying there like that, Walter, you're right, my God, what were we thinking?

No, Mulder thought again, while pink polished fingernails touched lips that smiled a soft, gentle smile that had never been for him. No. It's not like this, it can't be like this—

He floated up towards the ceiling, the warmth of the Light beckoning.

He would be welcome there. Welcomed and wanted.

Skinner wanted Scully, and Scully wanted Skinner. They had each other. Didn't need him. Kept it from him. A secret. Secrets. Betraying him, having sex behind his back, right there, nearly over his dead body—dying body, the Light cooing his name.

Scully reading the display on some machine, Skinner sliding his arm around her shoulder. Companionable. Companions. A couple, standing

there together, watching what was left of Mulder's physical ties.

It was wrong. Down deep in his gut wrong—tug of his body pulling him away from the Light.

Completely wrong. Making his heart ache *wrong*. Another tug.

Sickeningly wrong—

Lurch, fall from the ceiling, spin, spiral, plummet—

In a dark warehouse, a hyper-thin needle was withdrawn from the fold of a pale knee, while other men dismantled desks, unplugged phones, folded laptops shut.

Two men, both publicly dead, stared at the man hanging by his wrists from the ceiling hook.

The black man, dead for a while, looked at the more recently dead man at his side, squinting to see the face through the wreathing smoke.

"Do you think it'll work?"

"Of course it will," the white man said, carefully placing his cigarette stub in a metal tin, not a flake of ash escaping, taking another cigarette from the soft red and white Morleys pack.

"I'm not so sure—"

"Finish the job right," the man said, rich and husky as aged tobacco, "and it'll work."

A long, dark look from the black man.

Two men, identical, Arnold Schwarzeneggers to the nth degree, lowering Mulder's naked body from the hook, dressing him quickly, efficiently, in Mulder's familiar suit. Impassive, the black man did as he'd once done before and drew his gun on Mulder's unconscious body.

The smoking man blinked and winced with every recoil from the black man's gun.

"That's enough," he finally said, the toe of his black shoe gentle as it touched the blood escaping from Mulder's body. "Make the call and then we'll see the tide finally turn."

911, dialed on a stolen phone using a cloned phone number. Untraceable. Almost enough to make the smoker smile. He listened while the black man gave the details of address, victim, apparent status.

The smoker stared down at the body lying so neat and tidy at his feet, the bullet wounds almost pretty in their distinctive pattern. A sight Mulder had already seen this evening.

As the sirens neared, the smoking man actually smiled and closed the warehouse door behind him.



Saving Walter S.

This is set Christmas 1997, and yes, those things really were all on television that night. And of course, Skinner was watching the Alistair Sim version—only the best for our Skinner!



It had been years since he'd gone to Christmas Eve services. His absence hadn't mattered, had made not a whit of difference, for not a thing had changed: the hymns, the psalms, the readings were the same as they'd been as far back as his childhood. The piety, both real and assumed, were unchanged; the aromas and sights, unaltered, nostalgia trodden to mud by the relentless force of reality.

Hunger at the feast, no room at the inn, no longer a place for him here. If all his old world hadn't changed, he had. Beyond all recognition, he feared. Or hoped. Hard to tell these days.

Almost regretfully, he'd left his church once more and picked up food from his local Thai place on the way back to his condo. Not quite the tradition of his childhood or his many years of marriage, but it would do.

He didn't bother with more than a couple of lamps: just enough to stave off a stumble. Remote control in one hand, glass of whisky in the other, he dug in, prepared to wait out the season.

AMC was showing an old favorite, a film he remembered watching with Mom and Dad, Mom coming into his room in the middle of the night, black and white nightmares driving even a big brave ten-year-old back into his mother's arms.

Even now, Marley's screams made him shiver.

Even now.

Marley's, Morleys, and Ghosts of Christmas Future.

Deliberately, he took another large drink of his whisky.

Dark.

Deep dark.

Stark white slashing through dark.

White dirtying down into gray.



Gray soiling into black.

And the stark white cutting through it all again.

White. Gray. Black.

The white no longer stark, no longer cutting.

Seeping, sluggishly, slug-like, the disgusting white of decay and death and bodies in water too long.

Erupting. Darkness pustulating, squirming, from the scabrous white.

Faces. From long ago, the first of the faces he'd watched the life leach from. Faces bleeding into more faces, into bodies, body parts, body bags, floating above it all, screaming as the medics stuffed his body into the black body bag, stark hot white light calling to him across deepest midnight and then the darkness closing over him.

Darkness, devout darkness, blackness, endless blackness, until the white was cutting through it, sharp as pain, slicing, strafing him back through the darkness into the whites of the eyes of the men staring down at a dead man breathing. Gaspings, drowning, he grabbed for that time, so long ago, but the white was gone, dying into grayness, gray smoke, muted, mutilated, gray smoke burning into charcoal, into black.

And whiteness. There. In the distance. Beyond his reach. But coming towards him. Coming within his reach.

It was she. The Hag. His hag, come for him again with another bitter banquet of truths. Reaching out, white hand glimmering like death peeking through its cloak. Reaching out, for him. Offering.

If he dared.

The hand of Christmas Past stretched out behind him, pointing, pointing away from the light, towards, towards— Smoke, billowing, clouds and clouds of smoke rising from graves and the hand pointing, pointing—

Warm hands clutching him, pulling him back from the endless pits gaping at his feet, warm, living hands brushing away the smoke, warm, strong hands, turning him, turning him, away from the abyss to face—

He was on his own couch. No startlement, no theatrical gasp and sudden opening of his eyes, certainly no clutching at bedposts, not for Walter S. Skinner. Just not being asleep any longer. AMC had moved on to some Hollywood holiday saccharine, all sentimentality and happily-ever-after. He lay for a while, watching it. Letting the dream drift through his mind, the meaning butting at him like a cat demanding attention.

He ignored it.

It wasn't as if the dream had anything new to tell him. Nothing at all he didn't already know.

Fox Mulder, Knight In Shining Armor. Very nearly enough to make him laugh.

The poster in Mulder's office: I want to believe. And he did. He always had. Just hadn't had the guts from one ugly day in his 18th year.

But Mulder...

Mulder was facing his own fade to gray.

For Walter Skinner, the light was no longer coming towards him. It was simply standing there, blinking in and out of existence, a Morse code he still remembered. Remembered from sending out his own SOS years ago.

And for the first time in many years, appeasing the darkness scared him more than seizing the light did.

He lay there, still, and thought about that.

Very steadily, abstractedly grateful for the heating keeping the bad weather stopped at his windows, he went over to his desk, punched the first number on his speed dial. Listened, first to ringing, and then to the inimitable message. Hung up before the final beep.

Nothing he could say to a machine.

Probably nothing he could say to Mulder, for that matter.

But...

He looked at his watch. On impulse, he went to the front door. Opened it, to find Mulder loitering, with intent. And a half-shamed, half-hopeful expression on his face and a bottle of champagne in his arm.

"Mulder."

That look of his, that slight nod. "Last time I looked in the mirror." Warped smile, a haunting lingering in his eyes. "Although after Eddie van Blundht, maybe I should demand a full DNA test."

"Take my word for it," Skinner said dryly, the grayness dissipating easier than smoke. "You're Mulder."

Stepping aside to let Mulder in, as welcome a ritual as church had once been.

He didn't ask why Mulder was here: he never ever did, and Mulder only rarely offered either explanation or excuse. Went into the kitchen, knowing that Mulder would follow, would take his lead here, if nowhere else.

At least one other time that Mulder had taken his lead: not making a deal, Skinner doing that for



him. Doing that for Scully, too, but he'd made that deal to save Mulder's soul as much as Scully's life.

And when, exactly, had he started believing in the goodness of a man's soul again?

Mulder was bending over, putting the champagne into the fridge.

"You'll find sunflower seeds in that cupboard to your left."

Perfect mimicry of one of this season's TV ads, Mulder's voice cadenced just so: "Oh, you shouldn't have."

"Oh, I didn't. My housekeeper seems to have added sunflower seeds to the grocery list."

"Maybe I should leave the champagne for her."

"Not a chance. You hungry?"

An indifferent shrug, but Mulder glancing back at the fridge.

"Help yourself."

An odd mixture, Skinner thought, of both the food choices and Mulder himself. Push and pull, that was Mulder, and him, and them together. Mulder willing to show up on his doorstep in the middle of the night—any night, even Christmas—but unwilling to impinge by admitting hunger.

Metaphors, Skinner thought, watching Mulder work his mouth around a pickle. There were times when he really, really hated metaphors.

Wouldn't it be simpler to just say something? But no, Mulder had to just turn up, asking nothing, just being there. Wouldn't confess to hunger, but hungrily consumed everything offered.

And himself? Worse: all he did was lead the way back to the couch, and the television, and more gray silence.

Mulder was flicking through channels, Howard Stern scoffed at, ballet dismissed, *Nixon* mocked, then a sidelong glance, the remote being put down.

A camp western?

Skinner sighed. He outright sighed.

Mulder looked at him.

He looked at Mulder.

This was ridiculous. And this wasn't fair.

Mulder was the talkative one. Mulder, the one with the gift of gab. Mulder, with his endless verbosity, his theories and reports and rationales spilling forth like spring run-off.

But put Mulder on his couch in the middle of the night, and the best the idiot could muster was sucking on a pickle and watching a camp western.

Hell, Skinner thought, finding his glass empty, he had a marriage of 17 years founder on his own silence.

And now Mulder was sitting there waiting for Skinner to say something.

Ice ages moved quicker. And more easily.

Skinner looked down into his empty glass.

No words in there.

Words from Mulder, though, a dissertation on Divine, coprophagy and western movies as metaphor and expression of American ideals, disillusion and the correlation to getting financing for a western with a drag queen and Tab Hunter, plus a sidebar on Plains Indians' legends of abductions and visitations and berdaches.

Lots of words. All of them meaningless.

No, worse than that: all of them an expression of defeat. Of Christmas Future one step closer to fact.

Christ, he should know better than to watch old movies at this time of year.

Mid-spate, he got up and left Mulder to his running commentary.

Somewhere, in this kitchen, or maybe in the dining room he never used, there was what he was looking for. Where the hell would a housekeeper think was appropriate? Yep: top shelf, at the back, because rarely used.

On his way past, he turned the TV off—wondered for a second if it made a difference to switch the set off by the main switch instead of just the remote, a momentary flashback to the days before wireless remotes. Cessation of noise, Mulder's eyes ridiculously large, his lower lip ridiculously full. If it weren't for that nose, Mulder would be...

First Knight in Shining Armor and now *pretty*?

Probably just as well Mulder was the chatterbox of the two of them.

"Here."

Mulder looked up at him, that full-lipped mouth pressed tightly closed, eyes wide-open and utterly inscrutable. No smile as Mulder took the glass. Eyes watching him as he poured golden bubbles into the tall flutes given to him—when? He didn't remember. Didn't care. But it was a distraction from...

He never had been much of one for wearing his heart on his sleeve or this Sensitive New Age Guy blabbing about feelings, and as for Iron John and 'bonding' over beating drums...

Shit.

The champagne was fizzling happily in the





glasses, the heavy bottle making that sound unique to opened bottles of champagne.

He sighed. Again.

Put his glass down. Stood there, the coffee table between him and Mulder, the heady scent of champagne drifting up to him, mingling with the faint memory of Mulder's aftershave. Deliberately, Skinner pulled off his loosened, wrinkled tie, unbuttoned the top three buttons of his shirt, folded his cuffs back. Removed the watch that marked the minutes of their office meetings. Very deliberately, knowing Mulder would remember the last time he'd done this, he took his glasses off. He didn't have his case in his pocket this time, and for a second, he was lost: and then Mulder was taking his glasses from him. A soft click as they were placed on the table.

Mulder rising to his feet, handing Skinner a glass of gold. Eyes no longer inscrutable—that look more of a chatterbox than even Mulder usually managed.

So who needed spoken words?

He clinked his glass to Mulder's; smiled. Smiled all the wider at Mulder's reaction to him smiling. "It's late," he said. "We should be getting to bed."

Watched Mulder's own rare smile broaden to match his.

Christ, this easy, and he'd let them both play Camille for months over this.

The champagne glasses joined Skinner's glasses on the table, and Mulder's hand was cool against Skinner's palm, Mulder's eyes and voice pure heat. "You tired?"

"Not a bit."

Mulder's smile turning into an absolute grin. "You will be."

Skinner spun the smug bastard around, headed him for the stairs. Filled his hands—at last, oh God, and that ass was built just perfect for him—and his eyes with the sight of Fox Mulder finally going up those stairs, to his bedroom.

Behind him, the living room blurred into indefiniteness, his glasses lost on the brown haze of the table. In front of him, clear-cut, the denim of Mulder's jeans, the faded plum of his sweater, the flick of hair at his neck.

The only part of his future in anything like focus. But it was enough. And at his back, he could feel the past, Marley's and Morleys, fade away to nothing.



Mortal Sin

One of the first things I wrote in this fandom. It's based on the trailer for Gethsemane, playing 'what if' with it, even though we all knew Mulder would be just fine.



He was a walking cliché tonight, smoke and shadow wrapped in a long, midnight navy trenchcoat, the corridor light glinting briefly, menacingly, on his glasses, the stark white of his shirt collar.

A wedge of light followed him through the opening door, entering the darkened apartment with him, cutting off abruptly with the soft click of the closing door. A standing cliché now, statue-still, waiting until the darkness eased into shades of gray and black in the equidistant lights of transom and fish tank.

His tread was very light, as if he wasn't really there, or at the very least, as if he didn't want anyone to know he was there. He crossed the odd hallway, walked past the round table with its snaking coil of discarded yellow crime scene tape; stepped into the main room, crossed that too, keeping to the left, going round in front of the window to get to the couch, avoiding the more direct route completely. Compulsively.

Disturbing nothing, he sat down on the leather couch. Allowed his hands to leave his pockets, to touch the worn leather. He sat there, and time passed. He looked at the basketball: there would be no neighbors calling the building manager to complain about basketballs bouncing in the middle of the night. He looked at the television: no tapes, illicit or otherwise, running now. He looked at the fish tank, wondered who had taken the fish away already. He looked at the phone, at the answering machine that flashed forlornly that there were messages. Someone would have to call all those people back.

Not him.

Someone else would do that.

He looked at the window, the venetian blinds pulled up unevenly, the lower right hand window pane marred with thumbprints and residue from masking tape.



No more neighbors phoning to complain about people yelling at all hours of the night, or people being shot in the hallways or fighting in the elevators.

No more complaints about the noise.

Silence.

There was complete silence. Under the circumstances, another cliché, but even in the best of times, silence wasn't so unusual, in this place. Mulder and silence went hand in hand so often; no music in the car, no radio on while he worked on files, the TV on only if he was watching—or sleeping. Apart from that, silence.

Unless he was talking. God, how Mulder could talk—spinning tales, twisting reality until the most bizarre thing seemed mundane; until the steadiest, most banal fact became something weird and warped and untrustworthy. Or Mulder talking, in that quiet voice of his, warmth and humor and rueful affection coloring every word.

As for the anger and the bitterness and the recriminations and the fights—those had no place in here, not tonight.

But still, he would give them place—pride of place—if those fraught arguments could come back and usurp these things that should never have been here.

Finally, with difficulty, Skinner turned his head and looked directly at what should never have been here.

White chalk outline, scuffed by careless feet and blurred already, as if Mulder were fading into someone once known, someone no longer remembered clearly, fading as the dead inevitably fade. Within the graying whiteness, darker marks, shadows, and these were Mulder's shadows as much as history and pain had been. Bloodstains, of course, left there long enough that the floor's finish would be ruined, the wooden floor rising unevenly, roughly, in all the places where the blood had soaked in.

Shadows, within graying whiteness.

He didn't much care how late it was, or how early. Tomorrow morning, or later today, it didn't much matter which, there would be a cleaning crew coming in, a husband-wife team who specialized in doing what the relatives couldn't face, or when there were no relatives or...loved ones...in a position to do this miserable task. Cleaning up the signposts and post-it notes of life destroyed so messily. Shadows within graying white, and along one wall, the eloquent spray of dark shadows, a pattern that any FBI agent soon learns.

Skinner didn't need to see the report to know the details; he could read this room just as easily as any typed pages. No sign of struggle, no forced entry. An agent depressed, devastated by his partner's actions. Torn to shreds by what she'd said. One weapon present. One chamber empty. A small bullet hole. A large exit wound. Debris—oh, what a good word that was, reduce it to anonymity, meaningless flotsam, don't call it for what it was, for whom it had once been—splattered down the wall, dripping, sliding, small particles of matter congealing along the baseboard. A man, standing, facing the window, a man acting while the balance of his mind was disturbed, a man suffering severe emotional distress, a man who'd lost his best friend, and his partner. A man who'd recently had two small holes bored in his head, a man who'd been twice injected with a powerful hallucinogen, a man who'd witnessed a murder/suicide just a week before.

A man who was dealing with resurfacing memories, memories his mind had buried for good reason, memories so painful, so destructive, his mind had tried to erase them.

The investigating agent would be heaving a sigh of relief that it was so clear cut, so open and shut. No late nights over this one. Just fill out the forms, scan the ballistics report, write a report and hand it over to the Assistant Director.

Who, it was being said, must be heaving a sigh of relief of his own, now that he finally had Spooky Mulder off his hands.

The Assistant Director didn't sigh, in relief or otherwise.

He took his glasses off, leaned back against the sofa. He couldn't smell Mulder, of course: the familiar, subliminal scent that meant "Mulder lives here" had been drowned out by cordite, fingerprint dust, the overpowering aftershave of SAC Jackson. By other smells, too. Mulder—in his right mind—would be royally pissed with himself for not emptying his body before suicide. How he would have hated to think of himself lying there like that, with agents stepping over him and wrinkling their noses in disgust.

He would have hated that so much so perhaps—

No. No perhaps. There was no magic bullet here. He'd seen the body. He knew. Right down in the cold marrow of his bones, he knew.

Fox Mulder.

His Fox Mulder. Dead.





And Walter Skinner couldn't quite think of how he was going to go on.

He would go on, of course. He had a job, responsibilities. He had a nearly-ex-wife lying in a coma, cared for by his insurance now that her own had reached its lifetime cap. He had agents who depended on him, cases that needed to be resolved, programs to push through to improve integrity, results and morale.

And since Scully's...performance, he was the only one who even knew about that black-lunged bastard.

His gaze drifted back to the fuzzed outline of what had been a man.

Dead.

Not gone, not abducted, not off on some wild-goose chase that could get him killed.

Dead.

He was going to have to cope with that. He was going to have to assimilate that, make it part of him, because tomorrow, or today, he was going to stand in front of FBI-trained investigators and tell them the details of Mulder's death. And he was going to have to do it without betraying himself. Or Mulder.

Too much irony, if they'd kept it secret for three years only to betray their private truth because Mulder was dead.

Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.

Shuffled off this mortal coil and joined the choir invisible. This is an ex-Mulder.

Another one of Mulder's weird English comedy shows, and it would have been funny in Mulder's voice. But gallows humor didn't work nearly so well with Mulder newly cut down from his own personal gallows-tree.

Practice it. Say it until it sounded cold, meaningless, a generic "tragic event" and nothing more than the loss of a fine agent. Say it again and again and again, until the snickers over "a fine agent" wouldn't make him reach for his gun.

Dead. Agent Mulder is dead. The X-Files are dead. Special Agent Fox Mulder is dead.

He groaned. Allowed himself the luxury of at least thinking it.

My lover, my partner, is dead.

He couldn't say that. Would never be able to say that.

Oh, God, the funeral, standing there as nothing more than Mulder's boss, comforting Scully—fucking cunt bitch Scully—repeating the usual impersonal, meaningless pap bosses said about

dead agents, and he'd be comforting fucking Scully and offering his condolences to that old bitch Bill Mulder's wife and Cancer Man would be standing waiting in the wings to offer his own condolences to his old paramour, and what would he have? All he'd have would be looking mildly distressed at all this feminine emotion, glancing at his watch surreptitiously, going back to the office as soon as was decent.

There'd be no one offering him comfort, or condolences.

And he'd have to refrain from killing anyone who gave him a look and said bet you're glad Mulder's X-Files crap is all over.

This time, he got to his feet, walked over to the last mark Fox Mulder had made on this world.

White outline, the left hand scuffed out of existence already, the legs twisted in a position no living person ever adopted, the outline of the head such an unnatural angle and shape.

God, he'd finally have photographs of Mulder.

Crime scene photographs and autopsy reports—the first autopsy courtesy of Mulder that wouldn't come via Scully.

He looked down at the shape, at the way the arms were spread. Just like other times, if he discounted the missing hand. Mulder was always neat and tidy when he slept, so contained, probably from all those nights sleeping on the couch. But after sex... After sex, Mulder was all sated sprawl and warm eyes. Satisfaction, and always, always, the beginnings of hunger again. Always the same pattern, established along with trust after the first few months. They'd have sex, and afterwards, when he got up to leave, Mulder would say his name. The only time Mulder ever used his first name. And he'd turn, and look, and see that contented, lax sprawl, and the hunger in those eyes, and he'd give in. Get back into bed. Not for sex. Nothing so simple, nothing so—relatively—harmless. But to...to...to hold, and be held. To kiss, and be kissed. To simply be together, to not deny the emotions, to admit to them, not in the heat and mindlessness of sex, but in the quiet hunger of afterwards. To touch soft hair...

Footsteps, in the hallway.

He nearly reached for the lamp, to turn this into nothing more than the Assistant Director working compulsively late again.

But he recognized the click, click, click of that short stride.



Scully.

Scully, who was at least as responsible for this as he was. Probably more. His had been a sin of omission: he just hadn't seen this coming. But hers... The Catholics had a perfect name for it. Mortal sin. Hers had been a mortal sin.

Walter Skinner forced his right hand not to reach for his gun.

She was silhouetted in the doorway for a moment, and he heard her shock, breath hissing, as she saw the large shadow standing where her former partner had killed himself.

Good. Let her think that. After debunking him, after humiliating him, let her goddamn fucking think it was Mulder come back to haunt her.

The door was closed, the click of her shoes loud across the wooden floor. After a moment, voice not entirely steady, she asked, "Sir?"

Many thoughts flickered through his mind in that moment. But Mulder would never forgive him for any of them. "Yes?"

She actually sighed. Made him wish he had a tape of Mulder's voice. One of the tapes he'd saved from his voice mail or his answering machine at home. Watch her squeal as Mulder spoke to her from the shadows.

"I didn't know you would be here, sir."

Of course not. Who would expect a boss to spend the night sitting in the apartment of a dead agent who'd been nothing but a pain in the ass to him?

She was uncomfortable, unable to go farther into the room without coming within his reach. "Sir.... Is everything all right?"

He looked down at where she was standing, shadows within graying white, the toes of her shoes touching where Mulder's head had been.

"Oh God!" she whispered, jumping back. Even from here, with only the light from the street and the small window over the door, he could see her tremble. Could see her cheeks begin to glisten.

She'd done what she'd thought was right. Or she'd done what she'd thought she had to buy her own cure. Done what Mulder would not have condemned.

Almost dispassionately, he looked at the way her face was changing, at the smudging of color around her eyes. Tears. The tears he would never be allowed.

"Did you suspect he was going to kill himself?"

She stared at him in dumbfounded horror for a moment. "If I'd thought he was going to kill

himself, do you think I'd have been anywhere but right there at his side to stop him?"

His own hollow, guilty thoughts. "And if you couldn't stop him?"

Heavy sigh from her, the sigh he would never be allowed.

"Then to hell with his record, I'd have had him committed. Sir."

Anger. Anger at Mulder for doing this. He would be allowed that. But not that silver thread of grief woven through like tears.

"He would have never forgiven you for putting that on his record."

"With all due respect, sir," and her voice was shaking, raw emotion, so many emotions, all the emotions he would have to keep inside forever, "if it meant him being alive enough to hate me, I would think it a very small price to pay."

Emotions carefully packed away, voice barely curious, he asked, "What other prices have you had to pay, Agent Scully?"

She turned away from him then, hugging herself. Turned away from him, and from the image of Mulder fading on the floor.

Fitting, that silence should be the only answer. "I hope that at least you get the...goods...that you've paid for."

She was looking at him now, and he wondered if it was more than just what he'd said. If he'd betrayed himself, Mulder—

"Sir," she began, and it was that very careful tone of voice she sometimes used, "are you saying that perhaps a certain...procedure has been sold twice?"

He knew his smile was ugly, and cruel, and bitter, and part of him rejoiced to see her recoil from him. "No, Agent Scully. I think a certain procedure has been paid for twice and not delivered."

Fear in her eyes then, fear on her face, in her body language.

Then a dreadful moment as they looked at each other, and then, together, looked down.

Neither of them said it. Perhaps neither of them could bear to say it.

A procedure, paid for twice, as yet undelivered.

And if it had been paid for three times? What would be worse: to have the procedure delivered, and live with that graying outline forever, or have the procedure never materialize, and die knowing that everything, all of it, had been a waste. Meaningless. Empty sacrifice. An amusement for a sick bastard who might even be a father.





Skinner looked at Scully, really looked at her, as she stumbled backwards from what was left of Mulder.

After a moment, he stood aside, went over and sat down on the couch.

After a much longer moment, she followed him.

In darkness and in silence, they sat side by side, but not together, and both of them stared at where their partner had lain.

Her voice was soft as the confessional. “I thought...I thought he’d be furious. I thought he’d be so angry it would be weeks before he spoke to me. But this was Mulder, I knew he’d hear about my miraculous recovery. He’d ask medical experts, check out data, statistics... Then he’d come to me spitting bullets and demand to know if I’d sold out to Cancer Man to save my own skin.”

Skinner said nothing.

“I had it all worked out. I knew him, I *knew* him, I knew what he’d do, what he’d say. How long it would take him to forgive me.”

Skinner still said nothing.

“He would be so angry at me for so long, but then he would forgive me for wanting to live, for being—” voice catching, fingers clutching at the cross round her neck, the faith Mulder had saved for her, “—so desperate not to drift off on that boat, to come back, to my mom, my brothers—to him. I *knew* him. This—” stopping, swallowing, digging in her pocket for a handkerchief, “this wasn’t him.”

Skinner said something, but not what he wanted to say. Not what he wanted to scream. “Are you saying you believe this was a homicide?”

Hesitation, a twisted hope slowly dying. “No.” So sad. So bitter. So lonely.

So much in that one small word, and all of it denied to him.

Scully’s voice was barely above a whisper. “I never thought he’d commit suicide.”

“Never?”

“When he was still under the influence of that drug last week, yes, I was concerned. But once that wore off, I knew how depressed he was, I knew how upset and angry and hopeless he was feeling—but I knew he wouldn’t commit suicide.”

He allowed himself one small snarl. “You *knew*? How?”

“He promised me. He—” she gulped, blew her nose. “He came over to my apartment and told me how he felt—”

Told you some of how he felt, Skinner wanted to yell.

“—and that I didn’t have to worry about him, he was going to be okay, he was just low, he’d be okay in a while.”

I know, he wanted to say. He told me. He went to your apartment and then he came to mine, and I made love to him until he smiled and afterwards, he held onto me like a lost soul and cried against me.

“I just don’t understand it,” she was saying, her voice so terribly unprofessional, so completely different from her usual cool control. Her words were slurring, running into each other, but Skinner knew perfectly well she hadn’t been drinking. Grief. Grief and guilt and pain, breaking down every last barrier Dana Scully had.

Who better to know that, after all, than himself?

He knew a thing or two about walls. He knew a thing or two about keeping emotions carefully locked away. He knew a thing or two about feelings, and guilt, and redemption.

“He promised me. He swore he wasn’t suicidal. How could he do this? I *knew* him!”

“Did you?” Skinner heard the words drop, like stones, between them.

“Yes,” she said, but there was a question in her voice.

He wanted her to go away. He wanted her to take her question and her bright intelligence and just go away. Leave him here, with what little he had left of Fox Mulder.

Just go away, and leave him alone.

She gave him time, but he couldn’t find enough lies in himself to respond, the truth kicking at his teeth, furious to escape.

She looked once more at the outline that would be washed away in just a few hours, Skinner following her gaze, staring at the dark shadows, at the chalk outline the cleaning team would get rid of tomorrow. Today.

Erased.

Mulder would be erased, chalk on a sidewalk. His belongings would be boxed up and given to his mother if she wanted them, to the Salvation army if she didn’t. Clothes, books, CDs, although some of the video tapes had probably already made their way into law-enforcement’s private pockets. The computer would be donated somewhere, a school perhaps, to be used by people who had no idea who had owned it, who had died so near it.

No. He’d forgotten. The computer, all the files,



all the disks and the video collection were to go to Mulder's sort-of friends, the Lone Gunmen. The typewriter print hanging on the wall was to go to Scully—and would she realize what Mulder had hidden in the frame? There was a will, very organized, very legal, with something for many people who would be surprised that Mulder had thought of them. Although most of those bequests came with stings in their tail.

And for himself, the books. All of them, Mulder lying in bed, snuggled in all around him, laughing, telling him he had to take the crap along with the first editions. Wondering now, looking at Mulder's—Scully's—typewriter print, how many hours he'd spend going through every single one of those books, to see if Mulder had left him anything else. Anything more precious than information or evidence. Words they'd never said.

There was a touch on his forearm, and he turned, startled.

"Are you okay, sir?"

"Yes," he said, blinking. "Yes, of course."

"Pardon me, sir, but you don't seem okay."

"Losing a fine agent, not to crime, tragic event—"

The words wouldn't come out in the right order. He knew what he should say, but there was something in his throat, behind his eyes, stopping him. Stopping him. Stopping him dead.

Fox Mulder was dead.

He took a deep breath. Pulled himself together. She'd go eventually. He could let go then. Not before. Not a second before.

She'd been Mulder's partner, and friend. Not surprising, really, that she should respond with nothing more intrusive than a concerned glance and soothing silence, the polite ignoring of his fumbled words.

After a time, she said, "I know everyone says this after someone close to them suicides, but I had no idea. No—I had an idea, I was worried about him, but he told me—" she had to swallow again, and blow her nose, and Skinner knew what those tears felt like if they weren't let loose, if they were stoppered up inside, churning and kicking inside his head, behind his eyes, choking him—

"—he told me he wasn't going to do anything stupid, he told me—"

Her voice tripping over her memory, and Skinner knew how that burned, how it ate away at the heart of him. Her. Them.

She was whispering now, in the Confessional

again. "What did I do to him that he had to lie to me—about *this*? That he couldn't trust me—"

Silence again, neither one of them actually crying.

A car drove past outside, and Scully shifted in her seat. "We talked, he and I. Not about trivial things, I mean, I couldn't tell you what his favorite color was—"

Gray, Skinner thought. Gray because it was neither one thing nor the other, but shaded, and the color of disguise and the color of alien skin. And because Mulder loved charcoal suits, and pale gray suits, and had smiled, and groped him when Skinner had worn a new light gray suit one day.

"—but about important things. Religion, politics, hopes, fears. Life, death, sex, love—"

Did he mention me? he thought, sadness stealing through him like mist. Did he talk about love and then mention me? Do you know, Scully? Is there one person who knows what I'm feeling right now?

"—about how neither of us had a life outside of work. I *knew* him!"

"No."

She looked at him.

He should retreat, rebuild his walls, hide behind them, keep her at a distance.

But Mulder was dead. Fox Mulder was dead, and there was no one but him to know what their truth had been. Would it even be real, if no one knew? If no one remembered?

"Sir?"

And if she'd accused, or offered slim sympathy, he would have slapped her down with a well-placed remark.

But she was looking at him. Looking at him with honesty, and encouragement. And, perhaps, knowing.

She knew, she said.

Did she?

"Mulder—" his turn to swallow, his voice so rough, so husky. "Mulder will be greatly missed."

Her steady gaze didn't falter. "By both of us, sir," she said gently.

And perhaps sympathy was the worst thing of all.

There were emotions threatening him, pushing and pushing at his walls, threatening him with exposure.

But if she knew...

"Sir," Scully said, and it was that careful tone of voice again, "Mulder was a very remarkable man."





All he could do was nod.

“And it wasn’t just his intelligence, his talent, his abilities—”

The professional aspects, traits he could admit to admiring. Traits an FBI assistant director was allowed to admire.

“It was his qualities as a human being,” she was saying, and the emotions were taking over her voice again, all those emotions, all the ones he wasn’t allowed. “His integrity, his hell-bent sense of humor, his strength. His generosity,” she was saying, and she was looking right at Skinner, and Scully, little Miss I’m-Tougher-Than-the-Guys-Because-I-Have-To-Be-Scully, was crying unabashedly in front of him. Her eyes were reddening, make-up smearing, her nose turning red, and damp. Not pretty. Not pretty at all. But honest. And not hiding. No walls. Just emotions. All the emotions—

“The way he was always there if you let him be, the way he was so desperate to be cared for, the way he hurt because of his mother.”

“Yes,” he heard himself say, “yes.”

“The way he hardly ever laughed out loud, but he’d smile, half the time with just his eyes, but he’d spin a tale and just when you’d turn to tell him what a crock it was, you’d see him laughing at you with his eyes. Sometimes, you could still see the boy in him.”

“Oh, God....”

“The happy, joyous affectionate man he was born to be.”

“Please,” and he was whispering now, his walls crumbling to dust.

“He was so trapped,” Scully was saying, and now her hands were reaching out, for his, and he let her take hold of him. “He had all this...this...”

“Shit,” Skinner said. “He used to call it ‘all the family shit’.”

She gave him a small smile for that, for Mulder. “He had all this family shit, and the X-Files, and all the...shit that went with that.”

Skinner nodded, looked down at where her tiny hands were holding his own large hands, his glasses dirty, smeared, the image blurred.

“There were so many things he couldn’t do.”

And sometimes, he’d lie in bed, in Skinner’s arms, and talk about the things they would do, one day.

“And if he wanted to expose the big, public truths, there were so many small, personal truths he had to keep secret.”

Skinner nodded, and watched, bemused, as a droplet of water landed on the back of her hand.

Heard her make a sound, an odd noise, a combination of a gasp and a groan and a wordless protest.

“He was wonderful,” she said, voice nearly failing, “he was clever and witty and funny and kind and sweet—”

Another one of those drops of water splashing onto the back of her hand.

“And loving. He had so few people to love,” and she had to break off for a moment. “He had a lot of love to give to...them.” Deep breath. “Us.”

Another drop, and another, Scully’s pale hand glistening.

She said nothing.

He said nothing.

And the drops kept falling.

There were things she’d done that he hated her for. Things that he could never forgive. But he’d sold his soul to save Mulder from doing the same. Perhaps that was a small part of what she’d done. And he knew what it was to face death; knew what prices he’d pay to stay alive.

Even now.

Even with Fox Mulder dead.

Mulder had loved this woman. As a friend, as the sister who’d been stolen from him. Mulder had broken down in front of her, broken down for her, turned blindly in the sure certainty that her arms would be waiting for him.

Comfort.

Tomorrow, or three days from now, and God knew how many times in between, he’d be offering comfort, and condolences to people who could publicly claim to have suffered this terrible loss.

But who would offer him comfort, who would offer him condolences?

Perhaps the one other person who understood how he felt. The only other person Mulder could turn to, the only other person who could offer Mulder comfort.

Wordlessly, he yielded, as she pulled him into her arms. No awkwardness, from this woman who should be too small to do this so easily. But there had been Mulder. For both of them, in different ways, there had been Mulder.

And with the outline of Mulder’s death lingering on the floor, pale as a ghost, Walter Skinner accepted the only comfort, and the only condolences there would ever be for him.





Torrid

This is set at some amorphous point, mid-fifth season or so. I'd done a small story, very much a Sk/M, and garnered more than one response that thought either that Krycek was in it or that Krycek *ought* to have been in it, or that Krycek *would* be in whatever happened next in Mulder's life and from there, and from other people, there was "anyway, why don't you write some M/K next time?"

Well, the Chinese have a saying for this: be careful what you wish for.

It was hot in here. Torrid, he thought, rolling the word through his mind the way another man would roll a fine wine across his palate. Yes, torrid. Burning hot, his skin reddened from the reflected heat of the huge boiler that took up so much of this basement.



Where the hell was Scully?

He didn't even want to wonder where Skinner was. If those bastards had hurt him—

Deep calming, cleansing breaths.

Skinner had been fine: bruised, unconscious and left lying on the sidewalk, but they hadn't shot him. Just driven away and left him lying there in the street. Those bastards, he was going to—

Mulder smiled, made himself as comfortable as he could, leaning forward, his back away from the too-warm concrete wall, knees drawn up, arms linked loosely around them. Shifted, adjusted himself, grimacing as he brushed grit off his cock and balls. Well, at least he wasn't cold as well.

Pity he hadn't let Frohike talk him into the subcutaneous tracker after all.

God, it was hot in here. He let the sweat trickle down between his shoulder blades, while he sat there, thinking.

Slowly, he raised his head, rolling his shoulders to make sure there was no trace of stiffness. Stood up, silently, crossing the small room to stand behind the door, ready, waiting—

Three of them, fully armed.

Well, two of them were fully armed.

"Hey, Krycek," he said, pleasantly. "You look different—you cut your hair or something?"



“Fuck you, Mulder—”

“Guess that explains why you brought the goons, Krycek.” Wink, smile, teeth bared. “Beats Spanish Fly.”

Rolled with the punch, jaw hurting, not broken.

“So how does it feel,” Krycek whispered, getting down close to where Mulder sprawled on the floor, heat-pinked skin against charcoal concrete, “to be on the receiving end?”

“Isn’t that what I should be asking you, *Alex*?”

The left-hand goon drew back his right foot for a good kick, but Krycek stopped him, the prosthetic lacking any kind of grace. “Maybe not this time, Mulder. Is that why you’re pushing me? You want me to prove you wrong?”

Fury darkening Krycek’s eyes at the honest astonishment in Mulder’s. “Are you *nuts*?—no, don’t answer that, let me guess. Christ, Krycek, did they lop your brain as well as your arm?”

Involuntary twitch of shoulder muscles. And this time, Krycek let the goon have his fun, a single loud exhalation from Mulder, and then Krycek was standing up, walking away, taking his goons with him.

Mulder lay curled up on the floor, fairly comfortable, and nowhere nearly as badly hurt as he ought to be: he’d been kicked once by a goon, but an oddly gentle goon. A suspiciously gentle goon.

It was only a matter of time, then, he thought, before Krycek came back, to settle some unfinished business between them.

Only a matter of time.

Not much time. Not much time at all.

The door opening again. Familiar footsteps.

Mulder rolled onto his back, letting his legs fall open, Krycek’s gaze drawn there, of course. Knowing exactly how he looked, Mulder shifted, just enough, the smallest movement of his cock watched, hungrily.

Oh, this was going to be just too easy.

He stretched again, and let his left hand drift down to rub at the dappling of hair below his navel.

And smiled, as Krycek wrenched his gaze away.

Hid his smile, as Krycek had to clear his throat twice before the voice could be trusted.

“I won’t let you go, so you can stop with the show.”

“You won’t let me go?” Low, soft, drawing Krycek in closer. “Are you sure? You sure it

wouldn’t be worth it? You’d finally have me, *Alex*.” Keeping his voice phone-sex low, barricading his desperation and fear in the back of his mind. Way, way in the back of his mind, where they couldn’t betray him. “After all this time, you’d finally have me. And if you let me go, I’d owe you.” His fingers stroking along the thin line of hair below his navel, stranding through the richer darkness above his cock. “Let me go, and you can call me on that debt again and again,” letting his tongue moisten his lips, “and again. Wouldn’t that be worth it?”

He could see the answer on Krycek’s face. He was close, one more push—

Mulder touched his own cock, stroking it with easy familiarity.

Krycek watched.

Stroked his cock again, thumb sliding over the head.

And Krycek stared.

Ran his free hand down lower, over his balls, under them, the skin of his balls so warm on the back of his hand, his fingertip touching himself there, between his cheeks.

And Krycek looked away.

Swallowed first, to be sure, but looked away, resistance firming, and that was not what Mulder wanted to be getting hard at this moment.

Shit.

“It’s hot in here,” Krycek said, seeking refuge in inanity.

“Torrid,” Mulder agreed, stroking his cock with one hand, bringing his other hand up to play with his nipples.

And he had Krycek back in the palm of his hand.

All the times he’d slapped Krycek with the palm of his hand, the times he’d hit him, the times he yelled at him, and the heat that had burned in Krycek’s eyes, and body. Torrid.

Burning up.

Burning hot enough to get him out of here.

“What do you want?” he asked.

Startlement, Krycek very nearly jumping, before the half-smile dropped back in place. “More than a quick fuck, Mulder. If I let you go, I’m a dead man.”

“If you let me go, you can come with me, turn State’s Evidence—”

That was supposed to be laughter, Krycek breathless with the absurdity of it. “Oh, yeah, and that’s going to let me collect Social Security.”



“C’mon, Krycek, by the time you’re old enough, there won’t be Social Security. But think about it,” getting to his knees, “a new life,” getting to his feet, “a new identity,” stepping closer, touching Krycek’s cheek, “a new face,” touching Krycek’s chest, “a new you.”

Cynical answer, sounding like hope: “You sound like the Avon lady.”

“And you sound,” stepping right up close, his naked chest only inches from Krycek’s fashionably striped and zippered knit shirt, his naked cock rising up against the denim covering Krycek’s crotch, “tempted.” Fingertips stroking across Krycek’s lower lip. “Tempting. Tell me, Krycek,” he whispered, coming in close enough to kiss, “who do you want to be?”

“I— I—” Eyes wide, wild, chaos and confusion, no hint of trust, but the need, oh, the need and the hope were terrible to see.

“You want to be Alex, just plain Alex? Or you want to be Sasha?”

Shudder of response to that, flicker of—something—in Krycek’s eyes.

“Is that who you want to be? Is that who you *planned* to be, Sasha?”

“No—”

No conviction in that denial, denial aimed at Krycek himself, not Mulder. Mulder smiled, kept it sweet, gentle, as soft as his touch, framing Krycek’s face, holding him still and ready for the kiss.

Lips closing hard against his, keeping him out, so he drew back, whispered, “Oh, Sasha, let me, please...” and inched closer, pressing them together, and there it was, the first stirrings of victory, one hand coming to touch his ass, lips opening under his now.

It was easy, so easy, as if there’d been no interruption from the puppy-dog devotion of their brief days as partners.

—Skinner, quietly furious, nearly growling his explanation of how Krycek’s appointment had been against Skinner’s will—

No, concentrate on Krycek’s slick, wet mouth opening to him, concentrate on the hardness growing behind denim, the hand clutching his ass—concentrate on getting out of here, some leverage, some opportunity, some weakness that—

Gasp, Krycek bucking up into his hand, the zipper undone, the cock hot against his fingers, smooth skin flowing over firming flesh, vein

pulsing under his fingertips as blood pumped into hardness and heat.

Groan, as shirt was unzipped, as nipples pressed into his palms and then against his own, smooth skin rubbing against the sweat-damped hair on his own chest.

Sigh, as cock touched cock, both held in Mulder’s left hand, Krycek’s right hand rubbing up and down Mulder’s back now, mouths still open, wet, tongues smoothing and stroking and tasting and—

“Shh,” Mulder whispered, very careful, so much balancing on this. “Shh, it’s all right—” hands steady as he pushed Krycek’s shirt off, Krycek’s eyes large and too moist, Mulder’s mouth gentle and kind as he sucked and licked at the skin callused by the straps of the prosthetic. “I don’t mind,” he said, meeting Krycek’s gaze, and for this, he could tell the truth, “it doesn’t gross me out or anything, Krycek. It’s okay. Really, it’s—” undoing the last strap, easing the plastic off, putting it aside, putting it away, letting his mouth touch the first rough scar, “okay.”

Raw cry, honesty and truth in there, too. Krycek, right arm stronger now, all this time of compensating, all that power pressing Mulder against the old, painful wound. Holding Mulder there, for the kisses and caresses, the blessings and the apologies. And unexpected, the pulse of wetness against him, splashes of hot white, and the convulsive shudder of orgasm. Heavy weight in his arms, mouth open against his neck, whispering words that Mulder couldn’t hear.

“Shh,” Mulder said again, holding on tight, “shh, Sasha, it’s okay, I told you—”

“Yeah,” Krycek said, straightening, pulling his jeans up, too much practice for there to be any awkwardness in the doing up of zipper or buttons, but there was a dark pinkness to Krycek’s face and a twist of something, not shame, in Krycek’s eyes, as he bent to regain his left arm.

Mulder watched, intrigued, as Krycek turned his back—trust? Or simply knowing that Mulder wouldn’t attack, not during this, not with the door locked and fully armed goons on the other side—and went through the contortions, twists and humiliations of putting his prosthetic on in public. The shirt shrugged on, the rasp of a zipper, then Krycek facing him again, one glance spared for where Mulder’s near-erection was fading into quiescence.





It wasn't the shiny blackness of the alien swimming in Krycek's eyes, but something as dark, and as alien—and as hungry and need-filled. And slowly, very slowly, it became something as dead.

Krycek opened the door, stepped through it, Mulder yelling at him—

Silence, for a moment, as Krycek paused, his body out in the corridor, his one good hand on the door still open to Mulder's trap.

"You owe me," Mulder said, harsh, hard. Desperate.

A glance down at where knit cotton hid the blending of flesh into plastic. "Yeah. Yeah, I do. Mulder—"

Holding still, but willing Krycek, *wishing* Krycek—words mounding in his mind, ready to use, to inveigle, seduce, buy another chance—

"When they tell you you can save Scully and Skinner—"

What? No, Scully was off-duty when they'd come for him and Skinner had been lying on the sidewalk—

What, a nasty voice whispered in his mind, these guys can only afford one carload of goons at a time?

"No—" he said, not wanting to hear, knowing he needed to hear.

Very nearly sad, very nearly triumphant. "Don't believe them."

"But I saw—"

The glint of gold being drawn from a back pocket. A watch, always worn, even in bed, and a

delicate chain dangling its delicate symbol of a sometimes fragile faith.

His mouth worked, but he had run out of words. The door closed, firmly, and the lock clicked. Mulder's fists bruised themselves on the door and his throat burned raw with his single long howl.

Time. Passing.

Hotter than hell and thirst burning twice as hot. Key in the lock.

Krycek, again.

Mulder pinned a small smile on his face, tried to keep his eyes neutral. Gathered his strength to try again.

Two men behind Krycek.

Two dead men behind the one-armed bandit. He'd had only spilled blood as proof of one, and as for the other? How many other lies had he believed over the tangled course of his life?

A coil of smoke reaching lazily for the ceiling.

A black-lunged bastard he knew too well.

And behind him, shadowed eyes not quite able to look at him.

Mulder looked from one dead man to the other, felt pain and rage go to war within him as even Krycek looked at him with pity.

Krycek, with gun held firmly in his hand, nodding at him, nodding at the dead men. "He's all yours."

Mulder squared his shoulders, and looked at the two older men.

"Hello, Dad," he said, to both of them.





Foxhole

Obviously, this is set round about the end of third season or so, before Scully's 'cure.' It was inspired by an email from a friend who'd had a 'sucky night,' and was combined with Mulder's penchant for turning up, unannounced, on Skinner's doorstep. (after all, Skinner was hardly surprised in either Tunguska or Zero Sum.)

He'd dropped Scully off a half hour ago, but he still couldn't drop the worry of her: she'd been tired enough to admit to fatigue, ill enough to admit to illness, worn enough to lose her cool, and scared enough to snap and snarl at him.



This whole cancer thing sucked. He hated it, with a passion, with a vengeance, but never, ever, as much as she did.

Mulder sighed, again, and winced, again: sighing and brooding were getting to be habits round here, and if Scully found out, she'd give him one of *those* looks and say "Mulder" in *that* tone of voice, and he'd feel...

He'd feel grateful that she still had that in her. And he would feel even worse that there was nothing he could do for her.

Maybe that was why he'd finally ignored Skinner's advice—Skinner's deal—and called that walking carcinogen. Maybe something good would come of that. Something evil sure as hell would.

But if he could save Scully, if he could protect her, if he could undo what had been done to her in his name...

Evil, that it had come down to a choice between Samantha and Scully. But Samantha was—gone. Scully was—for the moment—still with him. In the end, a relatively easy choice. One that sucked, but then, that basically summed up his life these days.

He squinted upwards, at the traffic light dripping redly in the rain, the color running in the night. He wasn't going to let himself think about Scully's nosebleeds. He was going to think about her getting better, being whole again—

Apart from the ova that had been stolen from her.

Some things, he'd never be able to give back to her. He couldn't actually picture Scully as a mother, and up until a few



months ago, he'd believed she didn't much see herself as one. Now, of course, it didn't matter much how Scully saw herself. Desperately, he squelched the quisling voices in his head, concentrated, fiercely, on at least keeping her alive.

Even if the cost did suck, and he was sure it would.

The light finally changed, and he drove on, peering through the darkness and the rain. The wind gusted, buffeting his car, the steering wheel alive in his hands.

He wanted to go home. He wanted to be home, dry and warm, and on the phone, Scully teasing him the way she used to. Wanted her suffering and his guilt to be over and done with. Failing that, he wanted to at least just be out of this damned weather.

Another gust of wind, a tractor-trailer swinging suddenly into his lane of traffic, his car bucking, jolting, the transmission making the most godawful noise as he mounted the curb.

When his heart stopped pounding loud enough to deafen him, he realized he was still cursing under his breath, the wind howling its curses far louder, the car trembling. He took a deep breath, wiped his palms on his pants legs, waited till the tremor had left his hands enough to let him drive on. Put his foot back down on the accelerator—heard a most unnatural whirring, whizzing, sound.

Oh great. Just fucking great. He must have hit the transmission on the curb— Or, he thought, ducking his head embarrassedly even though there was no one to see him, the car had just jumped out of gear as it went up the curb. He slipped it back into drive, bumped once, twice, as he got the car back on the road. Thank god the transmission was fine, he thought: he didn't want to think how long it would take Triple A to get out to him on a night like this.

But he was going to need an alignment after this. The car was pulling to the right. Great way to spend his Saturday morning, especially since this rain wasn't forecast to ease up much before Sunday. The weekend, none too promising from the start, was beginning to really suck.

Potholes, he muttered, pulling into the center lane, away from the puddle-and-truck caused potholes to the far right.

Shit. Not potholes. There was a definite unevenness on the right front side, and it was getting worse. Bump, bump, bump, bump. A flat. He had a

fucking flat tire at 2 AM on a Friday night miles from home in the rain and the wind and the cold.

He heaved another of those sighs, pulled into a dark, deserted parking lot, dug out his phone, dug through his wallet till he found his membership card, dialed the AAA number. Busy. Redial. Busy. Redial. Busy.

Finger poised over the redial button, he stopped. Looked at the small embossed numbers. Expired. He'd let his membership expire.

He didn't even sigh this time. Didn't mutter or curse under his breath. Just went through the cards in his wallet till he found a cab company.

That number was busy too. It took seven hits of redial to find out from an overly loquacious dispatcher with nothing to dispatch that the cab company had taken most of its cars off the road due to weather and a sick-out by drivers wanting health benefits. He could, he was cheerfully informed, tell her where he was and she'd send the first available car, but honest, the truth was there'd probably be no cab till the next shift came on tomorrow. He hung up halfway through her expounding on bad weather and bad employers and the busy-ness of other cab companies.

Which left him stuck in his car, in the rain and the cold and the wind, miles from home and—

Maybe five blocks from Skinner's condo.

Wouldn't be the first time he'd shown up there in the early hours of the morning, and surely Skinner would let him borrow his yellow pages to find a cab company that would take him home?

Or maybe Skinner would let him borrow his couch.

Mulder got out of his car, pulled his coat uselessly around his neck, glared up at the pitch-black sky, scowled at the rain whipping white and sharp around the street lights, locked his car, and started walking.

By the time Skinner opened his door, Mulder was dripping. A pool was literally forming at his feet, his sodden coat heavy, dragging at his shoulders, rain dripping from his hair onto his face to continue dripping, drop drop drop, from the tip of his nose.

Skinner didn't say a word. Just opened his door and pointed Mulder towards the downstairs bath. The water puddling on the white tiles at his feet was a murky, oily grayish color and he glanced up at Skinner, ready to apologize. But Skinner just shrugged, handed him a big, dry bathrobe and closed the door on his way out.



Anyone would think Skinner was used to strange men showing up dripping at his door at 2:30 in the morning. It was comforting, though, to have such stolidness at his disposal, to have someone who didn't fuss or bother or complain, just did what needed to be done.

The bundle of his clothes dripped more foul water when he picked it up, so he stuffed it into the sink until he could ask Skinner—

"You finished?" Skinner, a perfunctory rap on the door, Skinner coming in with a large trash bag in one hand, a medium white towel in the other. With a complete absence of any awkwardness, Mulder found his wet clothes out of the way in the plastic bag and the towel stopping his hair from dripping down the back of his neck.

"Coffee?" Skinner asked, Mulder following him out of the bathroom. "Or hot chocolate?"

"You have hot chocolate?"

"My secret is out," Skinner said, sounding amused.

The kitchen was good sized, and white. White, white, white, the light so bright it made Mulder blink. Skinner was in white, too, his thick toweling bathrobe the twin of the one Mulder was wearing. Mulder helped himself to a kitchen chair—white painted pine, at a scrubbed pine table with white painted legs, with a heavy white ceramic bowl filled with fruit in the middle of the table. He mustered enough politeness to refrain from cataloguing the psychological reasons for this much pure and pristine white and settled down to watch Skinner move around his kitchen. Heavy white mugs from that cabinet, a white sugar bowl from that one, a gleaming white canister from the countertop. Real hot chocolate, made the way his housekeeper had made it when he was a kid; weird, to see Skinner going through this comforting childhood ritual. Milk poured into a pot, sugar and cocoa stirred in, Skinner standing at the stove, stirring.

He was tired, Mulder thought, watching him. That rubbing at the bridge of his nose was a complete giveaway, and the way the shoulders were rounded under the robe. Mulder shifted in his seat, craning a little to get a better look at Skinner, at the way the front gaped and displayed the curl of chest hair, at the strong, hard calves visible under the hem of the robe, and the large, straight feet. And the hands: they were large and steady, lifting the pot of hot milky chocolate, holding the heavy

mugs as he filled the stark white with warm brown.

A mug was handed to him, and he followed Skinner into the living room, sat beside his boss on the pale couch, sipped hot chocolate in companionable silence.

Weird. This was too weird for words.

But it was also... Well, he didn't actually want to put a name to it.

At his side, Skinner put his feet up on the coffee table, and wasn't in any hurry to close his bathrobe afterwards. Mulder watched out of the corner of his eyes, at the thick muscles of Skinner's thighs, the curve of his kneecaps, the glimpse of pink amidst dark hair at the cusp of those thighs. Then the bathrobe was flicked casually closed, and Mulder sipped his hot chocolate.

Eventually, Skinner put his empty mug on the coffee table, stretched, and Mulder didn't hide that he was watching the way that bathrobe revealed and hid the body under it.

They'd been so quiet, it was almost a surprise when Skinner finally spoke. "Do I want to know what happened?"

"Flat tire," Mulder said, shrugging, consumed, suddenly, by the knowledge that Skinner had watched the revelations of Mulder's robe. "I'd dropped Scully off, was heading home, a truck nearly ran me off the road, must've damaged the tire."

Skinner didn't say anything, but his expression asked a question.

"I couldn't even get through to the auto club, the cab company I called is having a sick-out. So, uh," reality coming back to annoy him, "can I borrow your phone book, call a cab—"

"Is that what you want to do, Mulder? Wait for a cab, put on wet clothes, take God alone knows how long to get back to your own place?"

Of course it wasn't; and the way Skinner said that, it had sounded a lot like an invitation. Carefully, Mulder replied, "No, that's not what I want. Would you let me crash here tonight?"

"Sure," Skinner said, getting to his feet, and this time, when his robe slid open to barely cover him, no effort was made to pull the robe tight. "You can have the couch—"

Which Mulder assumed was being said purely for form's sake.

"You can have the guest bedroom, but that would mean making up the bed first—"

Another pro forma offer.





“Or you can bunk with me.”

Paydirt. The offer he'd been hoping for since he'd started walking tonight. Hell, the offer he'd been hoping for since the very first time he'd turned up on Skinner's doorstep, Krycek the gooseberry notwithstanding. “I wouldn't want to be any trouble.”

And was that a distinct twinkle in Skinner's eyes? A hint of a smile curving those lips? “You're several years too late for that, Mulder.”

So was that a reference purely to professional trouble, or was Skinner telling him just how long Skinner had wanted him?

The first time they'd met, Skinner coming out from behind his desk, taking his glasses off, calling him Fox. More a technique of seduction than good managerial habits in these litigious days.

Well, why not? It had been that long for Mulder, even if he'd pretty much hated Skinner's guts at the beginning. Never stopped him from finding the man unnervingly attractive.

“You coming?” Skinner was asking him from the foot of the stairs.

A facetious answer tickled his tongue, but he swallowed the comment, followed Skinner up those stairs.

In the bedroom, years of professional practice kicked in before he could stop himself, automatically jotting down mental notes on the room's details, assessing Skinner through his environment: shelves and shelves of books, a stack of magazines, two large dressers, a large armchair with yesterday's suit draped neatly over the back and a huge, king-sized bed, the sheets thrown back, the feather pillow still dented and scrunched from Skinner being asleep. Mulder went round to the other side of the bed, stopped, for a moment. Looked up at Skinner, standing across the expanse of the bed.

Another pro forma comment, the response already known. “You don't have to do this, Mulder.”

“But I want to.”

A genuine, small smile. “Good.”

And then Skinner was dropping his robe across the foot of the bed, standing there naked, long enough for Mulder to look his fill.

Broad chest, incredibly broad, with a lush curling of hair hiding the nipples. Wide shoulders, and the elegant flare of collarbones. Sturdy waist, flat navel, hair narrowing down toward the belly

button, flaring out again to groin, to the thick darkness of hair there, and the darkening pink of thickening, rising cock.

Mulder swallowed, unconscious echo of what he wanted to do.

Below the slow, steady erection, dappled with shadow and a dusting of hair: ripe, plump balls, full and round, just made for Mulder's mouth.

Then the thighs he'd seen earlier, knees, the rest hidden by the bed.

A blur of skin and hair, until Mulder was looking into brown eyes, eyes that knew him, knew what he wanted.

“Come to bed,” Skinner said. “Take your robe off, let me see you.”

Mulder did as he was told, stood there, in his turn, letting Skinner look his fill.

Met, apparently, with approval.

Skinner knelt up on the bed, reached out and Mulder was clambering up to meet him, to grasp Skinner around the waist, to press up against him, to meet him mouth to mouth, tongue to tongue.

He hadn't expected this.

He'd wanted it; had daydreamed about it; had built elaborate and detailed masturbatory fantasies around it. But he hadn't expected this depth of hunger, this firing of need through his cock and belly, weakening his knees, liquefying his spine.

Hadn't expected this thrill, as Skinner withdrew from him, and cupped his face in one big hand. “We shouldn't do this,” Skinner said, and kissed him.

“How long have we spent, not doing this?” Skinner asked, and kissed him again before he could answer.

“How much time have we wasted being prudent and sensible and safe?” Another kiss, and Skinner's left hand taking confident possession of Mulder's cock, complete ownership, complete control in the easy gesture.

“Fuck that,” Mulder managed, before he yielded to temptation and kissed Skinner, deeply, again.

“I'll fuck you,” Skinner whispered, dark and low, the words shivering down Mulder's back, between his cheeks, licking round to curl the heat of Skinner's voice around Mulder's balls, his cock. “I'll fuck you on your back with your knees in the air, your legs over my shoulders and your mouth open, until you come, screaming my name.”

“Promises, promises,” Mulder whispered right back, licking the tip of Skinner's shoulder, all along



the sharp flare of shoulder blade as Skinner put his glasses aside. Another deep, shuddering thrill waylaid him, as Skinner turned back to face him, his heavy erection once more filling Mulder's hands.

Smiled, as he was pushed down onto his back, Skinner on top of him, rubbing their cocks slickly together. "Like that?" Skinner asked, a sinew of caress, cock to cock.

Mulder bit him, on the collar bone, on the arch of his shoulder, the side of his neck, the lobe of his ear. Surged up into him, arms going around him, his cock pushing up hard against Skinner's belly, the hair and muscle rubbing him sweetly.

"Oh, yeah, you like that."

"Can't deny that."

"Thought your mantra was—" sucking kisses and nibbles and bites on Mulder's nipples, skin licked and sucked, then words murmured, voice uneven, into Mulder's ear, "deny everything."

"That was last week. This week it's trust no one."

Stillness, and Mulder cursing himself for his special talent of saying the wrong thing.

Skinner looking at him, quizzical, brown eyes becoming very calm, Skinner steady and strong as a rock—almost frightening, for Mulder, for Skinner to be so sure of him, so completely free of doubt and insecurity. "Trust no one. It's why we never did this," hand squeezing Mulder's cock, a surge of arousal flashing and sparking through Mulder. "But," and Skinner's hand was very large and very warm as it cupped the vulnerable nape of Mulder's neck, "I trust you."

Which is why they were finally doing this. Why they'd left aside four years of discretion and common sense and sanity.

Well, Skinner's trust, and Mulder's need, twin paths, leading to one place. Mulder spread his legs, moaned as Skinner's fingers dipped beneath his balls, as those fingertips pressed against his hole.

Skinner had told him, said it out loud. Skinner trusted him.

God, the man's casual courage was daunting. Frightening. Because it called to him, invited him, the unilateral declaration a thing of devastating simplicity. Because by not asking, by not *needing*, it touched Mulder. Touched him inside, where he'd long thought himself moribund, with only Scully to keep that part of him alive, full life support system, Code Blues on a daily basis.

Trust.

To trust a man he knew had and would betray him, if necessary.

To trust a man with more than sex, with more than hunger, with more than need.

Could he do that? Should he? Dare he?

"Mulder."

"Yeah?"

"Stop thinking." And before Mulder could respond to that, Skinner ensured obedience, Skinner's mouth trailing fire and wetness the length of him, down his chest, down his belly, down his cock, sucking his balls, briefly, one at a time, into the cool wetness of mouth, and then, oh, God, and then Skinner's mouth was on him and Skinner's tongue was in him. Mulder clutched at him, fingers scrabbling in short hair and against taut smooth skin. Mulder thrust upwards, as Skinner's tongue fucked him, and Skinner's fist was such a tight, rippled tunnel round his cock. Mindless, Mulder kept on thrusting upwards, again and again, dimly aware he was making empty, aching noises, vaguely aware that he should slow down, but he couldn't, couldn't deny or postpone the pleasure, couldn't wrest control of his own body from Skinner's confident grip. He came, in great gouts of whiteness, and great shuddering breaths, and deep, broken groans.

Came to himself again, to find himself gathered in Skinner's arms, his semen being rubbed into his belly, into his chest, and Skinner's hard cock rubbing into his thigh, insistent, needy, so needy. Came to himself again, to drown in the whispered murmur of Skinner's voice, the crude words, the blunt carnality of the hunger casting him adrift.

"Thought you were going to fuck me," Mulder said, lifting his knees.

"Can't," Skinner breathed, pushing and pulling until Mulder was lying across the bed, his face at Skinner's groin. "Couldn't last long enough to fuck you the way I want to. C'mon, Fox, c'mon baby, suck me—"

Words breaking off on a hissed-in breath, bleeding into a lush groan as Mulder took in the head of Skinner's cock. Licking it, licking the slit where the clear drops pulsed out slowly, then sucking him in as far as he could, not far at all, no skill in this, no real practice either, but enthusiasm, and a deep, heated desire to give Skinner what he wanted, to do this right, to do this well and good, and to make Skinner want more. And more, and more. To make this good enough that Skinner





would come back for more, that Skinner would keep on throwing caution and common sense to the winds.

That Skinner would like him.

That Skinner would...

Would...

Love him.

Mulder heard himself moan, a breaking, tearing sound, some terrible dark fear coming loose inside him, as he sucked Skinner's cock hard, felt the pulse against his tongue, and tasted Skinner, the whiteness filling him to overflowing, nearly choking him.

And then, they were still, and quiet, questions and knowledge treacherous between them.

"Fox?"

He didn't want to let Skinner see his eyes. Knew, with terrifying certainty, that Skinner would take one look at him and *know*. Know his secret. Know this truth that Mulder had only just discovered lurking inside.

"Fox, look at me."

Mute, not yet trusting his voice enough to protest the use of his first name, Mulder simply shook his head. Couldn't maintain even that pretense of nothing more than post-coital *tristesse*, instinctively turning to rub his face against Skinner's stomach, his face damp.

He was being moved, and he struggled, briefly, his protest as real as Skinner's offer of the couch.

"It's all right," Skinner said, tucking Mulder in against his chest.

Rusty hacksaw voice, cutting at them both. "No it's not."

"It never is, but this one thing, *this*, is all right."

He nearly laughed over that. If Skinner only knew...

"I told you, I trust you."

What had that to do with—

Oh. Trust could lead to other things. Trust could be a euphemism for other things.

Maybe even for the things squirming and writhing inside Mulder right now.

Trust no one. This week's motto, and this week's lie. He trusted. He even, heaven help him, trusted this man to betray him as little as humanly possible.

And the other?

Call it sex. He'd call it sex and he'd explain away this loosening in him as the effects of unbridled sex. Of unfettering his body, of throwing aside convention and the rules and restraint.

That's what he'd call it, knowing himself for a liar, hiding, coward-small, for as long as he could.

And in the meantime, he'd burrow down into Skinner's warmth, and he'd hoard Skinner's strength wrapped around him, and he'd pretend this was just sex and the zygotic stirrings of trust.



A Proper Charlie



Yet another ‘Scully finds out and there’s no sex’ story, of which I have an appallingly high number lurking on my Mac. I was *trying* to write something else, but Charlie Scully just sat there and pick, pick, picked at me until I wrote this frothy little piece. I know we saw some guy (not Bill Jr.) and his family at Pa Scully’s funeral, but I’m taking a Chris Carter approach to canon in this universe.

He’d gone on ahead while she got herself a coffee, but instead of disappearing into the arcane depths of his office, she’d heard a couple of brief words and now he’d turned back at the threshold, was heading back towards her.

“Uh, Scully...don’t look now but...”

The dramatic overly-sepulchral delivery earned another look. “How many times have you seen *Scream* now, Mulder?”

An echo of the grin he used to have, sticking into her a like a butterfly pin. “Other than ‘too many times, Mulder?’” he said, still smiling at her.

Another echo: her own smile back at him felt rusty, and shame skittered along behind her like a shadow. “Other than that, Mulder.”

“Only once. But Scully,” he dropped into a theatrical whisper, “there’s a strange man in my office and I think he’s waiting for you, Scully, oooohhhh...”

“He’s here already? Wonderful—” Aware that Mulder had lagged behind, deliberately, not out of tact, but consideration. Poor Mulder: always trying to get it right, never quite hitting the mark. She didn’t need any privacy for this reunion, but given his history, she wasn’t exactly surprised Mulder didn’t have a clue what to do to get it right for once. “Come on, Mulder,” she called over her shoulder. “Hurry up, this is someone I want you to meet.”

She was engulfed in an enthusiastic hug the second she stepped into Mulder’s office, lifted off her feet and swung round. Anyone else, and she’d cut them off at the knee, but hell, this was Charlie.

Eventually, she pushed him off, her hands on his shoulders, taking a step back to look at him.





"I am so glad to see you alive and well," he said, "I wish I could've been here, but—"

"But you were on active duty and anyway, you're here now. It is *so* good to see you. I've missed you—"

"Me too. Hey, have you grown?"

She slapped him, of course, lightly, the way they always did, his laughter warmer and richer than she remembered. His arm still around her, she turned to her partner. "Mulder, I'd like you to meet my baby brother, Charlie, also known as Brown."

"Only when I drew on your homework, Lucy. Hi," smile brightening those nearly familiar blue eyes, strong hand reaching out, "how do you do, just Mulder."

A firm handshake, lingering, Mulder's eyes sliding to Scully, a half-formed question in them.

"When did your flight get in?" Scully said quickly.

"Couple of hours ago—and no, I didn't check in with you and I didn't call you because you were at work and I'm not Bill the Controller—plus, we'd already said I'd meet you for lunch."

She was grinning like a loon, but damn, it was just so *good* to have Charlie home. "My treat. Anything you want—"

No hesitation, and another quick smile at Mulder. "Pizza."

"There's a great ristorante we could—"

"Or hot dogs. Or a burger, oh, God, Dana, a burger, with cheese and onions and pickles."

"I offer you the finest our great capital has to offer and you want a burger?"

"Have mercy," he said, clutching her hands to his chest, "I have been so long from these shores."

Sobering her, of course, her hand touching hair as red as her own. "Were you really homesick?"

"Homesick and heartsick, Dana. But—" brightening, the easy smile warming his face again, and yet another look at Mulder, "I'm home now, the uniform is gone, gone, gone." A very definite look at Mulder. "I'm a free man now."

Scully cleared her throat. "And you want a burger. There's Bailey's—"

"Bailey's?" Mulder said. "He comes back and you offer him Bailey's? C'mon, Scully, if he's been homesick, he doesn't want Bailey's. He wants the real thing."

Another smile, which at least explained Bill Jr. and Scully: Charlie and Melissa had hogged all the openness. "You sound like a real expert, just Mulder."

"He's the fast-food king," Scully said, with just the slightest hint of an emphasis on the last word. "If you want pizza, Chinese or burgers, he's your man. Hot dogs, ah, for that you have to go elsewhere."

"Now that's where you're wrong, Scully," Mulder said, going round behind his desk to get his jacket, giving her a look that carried more than the expected double entendre. "I'm the biggest expert when it comes to wieners. So, we're going to Joe's for lunch?"

"Not a chance, Mulder."

The familiar deep voice, the familiar figure standing in the doorway.

If this had been a cartoon, Charlie Scully's jaw would've dropped to land with an audible thud on the floor.

"Hi," he said, hand extended, walking forward, staring as he shook Skinner's hand. "I'm Charlie Scully, Dana's brother."

"Charlie, this is *Assistant Director* Skinner," she said, "my *boss*," moving onto, "Mr. Skinner, sir, this is my baby brother Charlie," and finally resorting to, "Brown, we need to leave for lunch now. Right now."

Skinner took his hand back, glanced from Charlie Scully to Mulder. "Sorry, but Mulder won't be joining you. I just had a call from the accounting department regarding a rental car in Baton Rouge, something to do with a *swamp*. Is this sounding even vaguely familiar, Agent Mulder?"

"Ah, yeah, well, I was going to tell you, sir..."

"I think this is our cue to leave," Scully said, tugging—hard—on Charlie's arm. "I'll bring you lunch, Mulder. Charlie," she hissed, "out. Now!"

She'd wiped the ketchup off his chin before she'd realized what she was doing, Charlie, delighted, laughing at her. "You need to start breeding, Lucy."

Traffic going past, passers-by wrapped up against the cold, rain drops beginning to spatter on the sidewalk like blood.

"Dana? Dana, what did I say?"

Ridiculous, she told herself. Pathetic. But still, it took two attempts to clear the lump in her throat.

"Oh, Dana, I didn't mean to make you cry—"

"I am *not* crying," she said, a smile wobbling through. "How many times did I say that to you?"

"Nearly as many as I yelled the same thing at you. C'mon, I'm not Mom or Billy, you can tell me..."



"I don't know where to begin—I don't know how to make it all make sense."

"So give me the short version, short stuff."

She kicked him under the table, didn't pull away when he held her hand. Took a deep breath, and tried to make it make sense. "Without my consent or knowledge, some of my ova were harvested, and used..."

The wind whipping her cheeks, she sat on the bench and waited. Charlie was off, somewhere, in the park, striding too fast for her to keep up with him, walking his anger off.

Thank God Bill was in San Diego and Mom was in Minneapolis while Aunt Elizabeth was in hospital. Of course, if Dad or Missy had been here, Charlie wouldn't be as angry as this: he wouldn't need to be.

"Sorry," he said, hands in pockets, eyes lowered, no different from third grade when he'd wrecked her bike. "It just makes me so fu—damned angry the way they treated you."

"Charlie, we've been through this before—"

"Yeah, yeah, and you're more macho than Dad and your balls are bigger than Bill's, but Christ, Dana, your child—and what they did to you, breeding you behind your back—"

"What good will raging do, Charlie? Anger can blind us—"

"And anger can keep us warm sometimes, too. You *should* be angry, Dana, not..." a choppy gesture at her neat, sedate posture on the bench, "this way."

She looked across the small pond, wind-blown ripples reflecting only sky. "I have Mulder to be angry for me," she said, and realized just how true that was. "He's the one who rages at injustice."

"And you don't?"

So gently, so softly voiced a question, anchored with years of secrets shared and truths told, her own voice just as soft as she replied: "Inside."

"Keeping it bottled up isn't good for—"

"Keeping it bottled up is the only way to stop it from exploding and destroying me, Charlie," she told him firmly. "I've told you, this is a fight. I'm just not sure who's on which side."

"Or which side is which."

The beginnings of a smile creasing her face, so many in one day—Charlie was definitely home. "Or which who is on which side when."

He was looking at her strangely. "Or which side is which race."

"I told you," she said carefully, wondering where this was heading now, "I'm not sure—"

A mere breath of sound. "I am."

"Charlie?"

"Even guys in Bosnia and the Gulf get compassionate leave when their sister is dying from cancer, Dana."

She sat for a moment, watching the world, memorizing it, before she asked the question that would change everything. "What have you seen, Charlie?"

Shrug. Shuffle. Fingers shredding a sere leaf. "I don't know. Maybe it's advanced technology but where would we get the money for hardware that makes the Stealth look like the Kittyhawk? And there were people, Dana, guys from State, the Pentagon—and forget the CIA, some of the *initials* were classified. But I saw...stuff. Weird shit." Glance at her from under his own reddish lashes, nearly invisible without the mascara she always wore. "Scared the bejesus out of me, Dana."

Her breath plumed whitely. "Me too, Charlie," she whispered, surprised at the relief the admission carried with it, "me too."

They sat together like that for a few minutes, watching the world pass them by, oblivious.

"Oh, shit, Dana, look at the time—don't you need to get back?"

Three-ish. "Mulder won't mind. And if he needed me, believe me, he'd call."

"What about your Mr. Skinner?"

"Yes," she said, looking him straight in the eye, "what about Mr. Skinner?"

"Come on, Dana, Just Mulder is really something, but Skinner? Wow!"

"Charlie, he's my *boss*, don't..."

"Don't what?" again, so gently, so softly asked, blunting the sharpness of his glare. "Don't embarrass you?"

"Charlie, you've just left the military, you must be...over the moon about being free, about not having to hide any more—"

"I'm not going to mince around wafting my feather boa, Lucy. C'mon, Short Stack, if you didn't work with them, what would you do if you met Mulder and Skinner for the first time?"

It was the wind reddening her cheeks—Charlie looking at her, the way he always did, knowing her, Melissa rather than Bill. She smiled at him again, squeezed his hand, fiercely glad to have him home. "You're making me blush, Charlie. Okay, okay,"





hearing herself laugh, “if I didn’t work with them, if they were just strangers I met somewhere...I’d do exactly what you did. Only I think I’d probably embarrass myself.”

Charlie leaned back, sighed happily. “They are just *gorgeous*. And Skinner—sister of mine, he’s every enlisted man’s dream, because *he’s* not in the service.”

“But he’s still off-limits, Charlie.”

“Why? Because he’s your boss?”

“Well...” No point in lying, not to Charlie.

“Okay, yes. And because he’s straight. Divorced.”

Her baby brother leaning in close, whispering right into her ear: “And Oscar Wilde was married with two kids. Marriage—”

Joining in with him in the old refrain: “doesn’t prove anything. Okay, but he *is* my boss, Charlie, and I *do* work with Mulder, so hands off.”

Grinning at her, nudging her with his elbow. “Scared I’ll steal ‘em both away?”

Grin fading under her seriousness. “They’re not your type, Charlie. I don’t want you getting hurt and I don’t want an awkward situation when they have to turn you down.”

“That’s one of the things I always loved best about you, Lucy—you never pull your punches. All right already, they’re safe from me.”

“I didn’t mean it that way—” Belatedly, she recognized that devilish twinkle in his eyes.

“Gotcha,” he said. “I think that puts me three up on you.”

“You’re still keeping score?” Walking beside him now, Charlie taking her arm, keeping her close as always, their conversation sliding into easy, familiar paths.

■ Three Weeks Later:

“Charlie! Aren’t you ready yet?”

He closed her guest bedroom door behind him, keeping his mess out of her sight. “This okay?”

She half glanced at him. “Yeah, sure, it’s fine.”

Charlie rolled his eyes in an expression Mulder would have recognized better on another red-headed Scully. “Thanks for taking so much time, Dana.”

“Charlie, we’ve been through this. It’s not—”

“—a date, I got that, I got that. But Mulder’s going to be there, and *he’s* going to be there and okay, so I promised I wouldn’t make any moves on them, but you didn’t say anything about *enticing* them, now did you?”

“Charlie—”

He threw himself down onto her couch, grinned at her. “I’m incorrigible, yeah, I know. Want a beer before we leave?”

“I’ll pass—let you guys drink, I’ll be the designated driver.”

He raised his eyebrows at her, archly. “You think Mr. Walter S. Skinner, Assistant Director of the FBI, ex-marine and Mr. SuperTop is going to let anybody else drive?”

“Oh no, we are *not* getting into that again, Charles Michael Scully.”

“Ooooh, all three names, you really *are* pissed, aren’tya, Mom?”

She hit him on the head with a pillow and smiled, triumphant, as the doorbell rang and Charlie scrambled to undo the damage to his hair.

Mulder on her doorstep, in loose blue sweater and tight jeans, and damn her brother, but she was getting into the habit of looking at Mulder like a stranger, taking in the flop of his soft, clean hair, the fullness of his lower lip, the endless depths of his eyes, the bulge of his crotch—

“Uh, Earth to Scully?”

She raised her eyes to meet Mulder’s uneasy gaze. “Sorry. Thinking about today’s autopsy,” she lied, smoothly, Mulder fooled by the reference, Charlie distracted by Mulder’s reaction.

“Today’s autopsy?” Charlie asked as they went down to Skinner’s car.

Mulder’s expression was inimical. “Third man this week, found in a dumpster. Castrated.”

Which explained Mulder’s reaction, obviously. “Ouch.”

And then they were at the discreet, anonymous gray car, she and Charlie in the back seat, Mulder sliding into the front seat. Skinner, in casual clothes, his sweater green, his jeans green and tighter, as far as she could tell, than Mulder’s.

She didn’t need to check to know that her kid brother was laughing at her, so she hit him, hard, just once, on principle.

Didn’t work this time either, Charlie leaning over and whispering, “So *this* is why you don’t socialize with him, huh?”

“Sorry,” Skinner said, overtaking a truck, “I didn’t hear you, Charlie?”

Revenge, Scully thought, watching her urbane brother blushing and at a loss for words like a teenager again.



“I, uh, I was just saying to Dana I appreciate the invitation to the basketball game.”

“No problem. No reason to let the tickets go to waste. So have you been enjoying being Stateside again?”

■ Later that night

Charlie beat her to the door, laughingly jostling with her to be the one to unlock the front door.

Flopping down on his sister’s couch, tossing a pillow at her. “You could’ve just *told* me,” he said.

“Told you what? Coffee?”

“Sure. Told me about them.”

Pulling the ground coffee from the fridge, getting mugs from the cabinet. “Told you what?”

“That they’re a *couple*,” he said, adding a Simpson “d’oh” for good measure.

Reaching for the milk, sniffing it suspiciously. “Who are?”

“Mulder and Skinner!”

“Yeah, right. You’re going to have to do better than that, Charlie. I’m still two up on you.”

“Dana, stop it. Seriously, you should just’ve told me. I’m not going to blab it around, you can trust me, for God’s sake.”

Putting the milk down carefully, crossing the living to where her brother lay sprawled, Mulderesque, on her couch, she was trying very hard to not let it show, failing miserably, too. “Charlie—D’you mean—? Are you saying—? *Them*? With each other?”

“Oh fuck,” sitting up, appalled, hand flying to his mouth in another Scullyism. “You didn’t know.”

Raising an eyebrow at him. “And you don’t know either. So they’re comfortable together—” and no way in hell was she going to admit how shocked she’d been at the way Skinner and Mulder seemed to just fit together, anticipating each other, moving so easily around each other, teasing jokes that sounded...that sounded long-standing. “Okay, so they’re *very* comfortable together, and they have a lot of shared jokes but that doesn’t mean anything, Charlie.”

“You think that’s all there is?” Clarifying: “Them being...comfortable...together.”

“I said they were very comfortable...” Trailing off, clambering onto the couch beside her brother, curling up in the small space left by him. “You think they really are?”

“Really are what? A couple? Or really are,” voice lowering conspiratorially, “fucking?”

“Charlie!”

“C’mon, Dana, Bill’s the prude in the family.”

“But this is Mulder and my boss we’re talking about!”

“You don’t seem to treat him much like a boss, Lucy.”

Caught.

“Yes, but...” Looking at her brother. Thinking about this. “So is this just ‘it takes one to know one,’ or did Mulder say something?”

“They don’t exactly hide it from you, Dana.”

“Yes they do!”

“How? They were all over each other tonight—”

“No they weren’t. Just because Skinner—” put his hand in the small of Mulder’s back, and Mulder had leaned on Skinner’s thigh to reach round and pass her the popcorn, and Mulder had stolen a drink of Skinner’s beer, and Skinner had known what Mulder liked on his hot dog, and Skinner had grabbed Mulder when his team had beaten Mulder’s...

Consider the evidence. The way Skinner had been with his own wife. The way he was in the office, the reputation he had among the other agents. Compare and contrast to the way he was with Mulder. Her very own Mulder. Who’d been bright-eyed and almost suspiciously upbeat, keyed up, happy, grinning over nothing, sending her constant, conspiratorial little glances...

Her brother was smiling at her, and she found herself smiling back. “No, they didn’t hide it from me, did they?”

“Nope.”

“Tonight,” she added, and smiled all the more as her brother recognized that tone of voice.

“Dana? What?”

“They didn’t hide it tonight, right?”

“Right...”

“And they were *very* comfortable together, right?”

“Right...”

“Which means that Mulder didn’t tell me.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So...”

Thinking about Mulder, and Skinner, together. And Mulder not telling her. “I think it’s time Mulder and I had a little talk...” And Charlie Scully, who knew his sister only too well, started to laugh.



The Gift

Obviously, this is set in a universe where Gethsemane (the X-Files episode, not the religious event!) never happened and before fifth season. Oh, and the date at the end? Nope, it's not Skinner's birthday, nor their anniversary, nor anything to do with when I started, finished, or conceived this story. Let's just say that walking through a Hallmark shop a week or so prior to this event inspired me!



Mulder shoved his hands deeper in his jeans' pockets, and glowered at yet another window display. He didn't actually mind shopping; quite enjoyed it, most of the time. Loved walking into a menswear store and watching as the salesmen argued over who was going to get him. Loved standing there while some guy tried not to salivate while measuring his inseam. Loved the way he'd have four guys waiting on him, vying to see which sweater went best with the color of his eyes.

This, however, just wasn't any fun at all.

And no, he didn't give a damn that he sounded like a spoiled brat, even to himself: he was, frankly, entitled.

He moved on; to the next window, this one displaying enough golf paraphernalia to stock St. Andrew's and The Masters and still have enough left for Dinah Shore and her lady friends.

Skinner didn't play golf.

Fine. On to the next window.

Skinner didn't play tennis.

And Skinner used the FBI gym, the FBI pool, the FBI track. Or the gym and the pool in his apartment building.

Whoopee.

To the next window.

Maybe Skinner would appreciate a satin teddy or the latest 'sheer support' bras.

Or maybe Skinner would use those spaghetti straps to strangle him.

Kids clothes. Clothes for Barbie—oh, sorry, those were clothes for teen-aged girls. Teen-aged girls with bad taste. God, those sweaters would be too short even on Scully.

A 'health' store, with bottles of the latest fads in herbs and vitamins.



Oh, yeah, Skinner would really appreciate the underlying message in those little gifts.

A card store, windows dripping last minute Father's Day cards and hideous trinkets. A furniture store with a 'Just for Dad' recliner, a sunglasses store, a bath stuff store.

Walter Skinner reclining in strawberry scented bubbles.

No, Mulder didn't think so either.—

Mulder took the escalator up to the next level of the mall, nimbly dodging strollers, giggling teens and people taking surveys, and emerged safely with an entirely new level of mall to mine.

A bookstore: that was possible.

Half an hour later.

No books. Or too many books. Did Skinner have that photography book? Would he appreciate that one, or consider it too pornographic for an assistant director of the FBI?

Mulder was pretty sure Georgia O'Keefe wasn't Skinner's style, and Mapplethorpe would get him hung. Which took care of hobby books.

And after some of their recent cases, he didn't much think Skinner would appreciate the latest Stephen King. Oh, here was the perfect thing: *Mindhunter* by John Douglas, yep, Skinner would love that. Almost as much as one by Bill Patterson.

So no books.

Candy store. Nope. If it wasn't imported, and Belgian, forget it.

A wine store. That might be it...

Champagne would be trying just that bit too much, white wine too subjective a preference, and how could he know if Beaujolais, Merlot, Pinot Noir or something else entirely was Skinner's choice in red this week?

And he refused to even consider kitchenware.

Ditto for the bed'n'bath store next door.

A back remedy store? Oh, yes, that would go down just swell: here sir, since you're getting so old...

Skinner's back was fine. No back remedies, or he'd be the one to end up in traction.

More clothes.

Sweaters. Shirts, ties, belts, underwear, pajamas, T-shirts, golf shirts, pants, shorts...

He'd find something in here. Guaranteed.

He began with the sweaters, was nearly defeated by the sheer magnitude of choice offered.

Then the 'what size' problem hit him with all the subtlety of a dyspeptic buffalo. Length of sleeve. Width of neck. Fabric. Texture. Style.

Okay. Ties. Ties were good, ties were safe.

His choice in ties was laughed at, no matter how much time he spent carefully selecting what he thought were perfectly normal, suitable G-man ties.

Okay, so no ties.

Pajamas and underwear.

Oh, yeah, that would look good, an agent giving his boss briefs.

Shirts. Belts.

He'd given his dad shirts for years.

So no shirts.

And belts... Mulder stood handling the belts for a long time, before leaving them behind.

Belts were something for Skinner to choose.

Disappointed salesmen in his wake, Mulder left for pastures greener.

Two hours later, empty-handed, he arrived.

The door was opened almost immediately, Skinner staring at him for a moment. "I wasn't aware we'd scheduled a meeting, Agent Mulder."

"We hadn't," Mulder said, easing his way in. "I was in the neighborhood..."

"On a Sunday afternoon, and you decided to stop by my apartment?"

Mulder looked around, sniffed, surreptitiously: no smell of tobacco. Which warranted a careful, assessing look at Skinner.

Skinner, in black sweater with the sleeves rolled up, and black jeans. Old black jeans. Faded black jeans. Black jeans that were tight, and form-fitting, and faded along every...detail.

Creak, clack, brain crashing back into gear, jump-starting his mouth. "I wasn't busy."

"And that's why you came here?"

Subtle nuance in the voice soft and dark as that sweater.

They didn't discuss this. They never discussed this. They just—sometimes—did it.

"I'm sorry, sir," Mulder said, lowering his head and folding his hands neatly behind his back. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"Look at me."

Mulder looked up, through lowered lashes. Allowed his mouth to drop slightly open. Just enough. An invitation, not a demand.

He'd learned not to demand.

Skinner was standing there, hands on hips, looking at him.

Stone-faced, unyielding, controlled.

Mulder was hard already.





Finally: a nod, and Skinner pushing his sleeves up again. “Upstairs,” he said.

He knew better than to smile, but it was there, inside him, as he let the day, and the world, slide away. Just him, and Skinner, and what they did, sometimes. “Yes, sir.”

All the way up those fourteen steps, he could feel Skinner’s gaze on his ass, stripping him of his pretenses and bastions, seeing him for what he truly was. What he could dare to be, with Skinner.

At the door to the bedroom, Mulder stopped, awaiting instructions, and every one of Skinner’s words undid another knot of tension in his spine, leaving him languid with anticipation: “Naked. Shower first, and clean yourself out.”

“Yes, sir,” Mulder said, stripping right there, without even checking to see if the vertical blinds were closed over the window at the end of the hall. He simply did as he was told.

Trust.

That’s what this was all about.

Well, that, and sex.

He made sure he was completely dry before he knocked on the bedroom door.

Waited, impatiently, hungry, until he was told to enter.

The blinds and drapes were drawn, absolutely no light entering from outside. One lamp dripping pale yellow in a small circle, the bed stripped down to the bottom sheet, bare necessities, the simplicity of their needs.

The cuffs were already in place.

Mulder’s cock stirred, his erection returning, his cock rising as he walked towards the bed.

Stood there, waiting again, eyes lowered, although he wanted, desperately, to stare.

Shivered, naked and vulnerable in more than body, Skinner looking inside him, knowing his thoughts, Skinner’s voice stroking him like leather down his back.

“Look at me.”

He looked. And permitted, looked even more, drinking it in. Skinner was standing at the other side of the bed, naked. A special treat, that, to allow him to see so much so soon, having done nothing to earn it. Skinner was right beside the light, every muscle picked out in the pearlescent glow. Every muscle, and the perfect chest hair, and the gorgeous, heavy curve of his cock.

And the gorgeous, heavy curve of the belt, dripping from Skinner’s left hand.

“On the bed. Face down.”

No need to think, all that was required was that he react, and that he obey. Barely a breath, and he was on the bed, face down, with arms raised, wrists in the cuffs, waiting to be locked in place.

Click. Click. He tugged: secure. No escape.

All right, so they both knew he could release these easily if he wanted to, or in case of emergency. But they both also knew he wouldn’t free himself for anything less than the Apocalypse or CSM showing up at the door: the illusion of freedom, and the actuality of obedience.

Cream, being rubbed into his shoulders, and the tops of his thighs, dappling down to his buttocks. Cream that smelled of the locker room, BENGAY beginning to burn nice and warm. An old quilt covering him now, some crib quilt made a long time ago by someone long forgotten. Someone who had never imagined to what use her quilt would be put.

Mulder lay there, and waited.

Time, passing.

And he waited.

Time passing.

He squirmed, rubbing his cock into the sheet under him, rubbing his nipples against fabric smooth as skin.

Time passing.

And it was time for him to earn what came next, to earn his reward with this unnatural patience and obedience.

So he waited, wanting, comfort growing inside apace with desire as he surrendered his will, as he was anchored, and steadied.

Still, he waited.

And then...

The sound of air being displaced, a muffled whack, and the sweet sting of pain.

No marks to betray them, but the pleasure of almost the full pain of the belt marrying the lingering after-sting as the ointment burned.

From his shoulders to his mid-thighs, again and again, the sound, the feel, the pure pain, and the warm, warm glow of pleasure blurring along his nerves, into his muscles, turning his bones liquid, setting him free in this oasis of sensation.

The warmth turning into heat, too hot, beginning to edge from pleasurable pain to real pain—and then, as always, it stopped.



One blow away from spoiling it, it stopped.

The quilt removed, coolness along his heated skin, coolness and warm hands, the air motionless against him, the hands moving, skimming, pressing, tracing, molding, whatever pleased Skinner.

And Mulder knew he pleased Skinner.

Knew it from the way Skinner touched him, knew it from the way Skinner did this against all common sense, knew it from the way Skinner lingered over him.

Knew it, too, from the care Skinner took. There was a cool dampness against him, making sure there was no unabsorbed BENGAY to get in where he really didn't want it to be. And then the hands were back again, stroking him, sliding between his buttocks, down, between his legs, touching the back of his balls, fingering him, moving him, one hand touching him between the cheeks, the other stroking his cock.

A finger inside him, sudden, cool, dry.

His cock pulled down between his legs, his balls pulled tight by the pressure of his cock being pulled hard against them, separating them, scrotum tightly shining, his cock pulled backwards, upwards towards his ass, far enough to hurt. Just enough. To what had been his limit, once, and then more, harder, farther, to what was his limit now.

Movement behind him, the mattress dipping under the familiarity of Skinner's weight.

Skinner's mouth on him, licking the tip, tasting him, licking the crown of him again, and then the tongue sliding that last inch, wetness licking at the darkness of his ass.

Not something they'd done very often. The sensation surged through Mulder, his balls trying to pull up tighter, his ass closing tight, hungry to pull Skinner inside him.

"Please," Mulder said, raising himself up onto his knees, wanting more of Skinner's mouth. "Oh, sir, please."

He was abandoned.

His cock slapped up against his belly, the head wet, the air-cooling it, taking him a few steps away from the edge of orgasm. He knelt there, ass in the air, knees widespread, his asshole exposed.

Mulder waited.

And waited.

Heard a voice: His voice. Warm, and rough, like a tongue rasping down his spine. "What do you want?"

"I want you to fuck me."

A hard slap, between his cheeks, the fingertips catching his balls. Enough to make him jump, not enough to lose his erection, the pain jangling tenderly through him.

"What do you want?"

He'd told Skinner what he wanted. Told him, told him—

"I want you to..."

Another hard slap, and before the heat of it had faded, a hand reaching between his legs, holding his balls, tugging them downwards, hurting him. It was... heavenly.

"I want you to spank me, sir," he said, and felt his face burn hotly as the rest of the truth died in his throat.

"How?"

One hand, tugging sweetly on his balls, the other hand stroking his ass so gently. Not enough. Nowhere near enough.

He wouldn't get what he needed, what he wanted, unless he actually said it.

Fear, bitter as bile in his throat.

They'd reached a limit weeks ago, had been working up towards the next limit, the next barrier, as they had done so many times, with so many of his other limits. Easy enough, to breach those barriers. Easy enough.

But this wasn't just sex. This wasn't just pain, or perversion, mere pleasures of the flesh.

This was about a truth he'd thought himself ready to face.

Seemed he might have been wrong.

He knew what Skinner wanted from him; knew what Skinner was demanding of him. Wanted to give it, to both of them, for both of them. But to put into words what they had never spoken of before...

To confess.

It was harder than he'd imagined it could ever be.

Skinner was indulging him, giving him an amazing, and flattering, amount of leeway to get him through this, Skinner's voice seductive and encouraging as Skinner asked again: "How do you want it?"

"Over your knee, sir," he breathed, so low he barely heard it himself.

Smack! Hard on his ass, and he groaned, the first aching crack of ice floe thawing in spring.

"Louder," Skinner told him.

The words were inside him, tumbling over and over like rocks down a mountain, bruising him. He





swallowed, fought himself, said what he could.

“Over your knee, sir.”

A lifeline thrown to him, if he had the courage to take it, to hold onto it. “Like a bad boy, Fox?”

Like a boy?

How could a man admit a thing like that yet still see a man’s face in the mirror come morning?

The hand stroking his ass gently, Skinner giving him time, giving him space. Giving him the warmth of his voice. “I asked you a question.”

He’d heard the question. Couldn’t quite bring himself to hear the answer. To say that answer out loud? To admit it was to make it true. To make this deeper than any game.

To make this real.

To lay his soul bare, his shame and his need in plain sight.

He couldn’t say it. Not yet, not quite yet.

He breathed in, a souging sob, and left only silence.

Skinner was leaning over him, uncuffing him, rolling him onto his back.

No expression on Skinner’s face, no disapproval, no approval, nothing. Just Skinner, as impassive as he’d ever been, uncuffing him, and reaching for the lube.

It would end, like this, with a simple fucking, and never be mentioned again, that unbreached barrier stabbing upwards between them.

Skinner was lubing him up now, one finger in him, soon pushing two inside him, while Skinner’s free hand was bringing Skinner back to full erection.

No disapproval. None at all. Just...disappointment.

He’d failed Skinner. He’d been led to his limits, and allowed to find his own truths, in his own time. And now, when he’d come here, today of all days, no mistaking his intent, no mistaking his tacit promise—he’d failed Skinner.

“Sir?”

An inquiring look.

“Pleas—don’t.”

The fingers withdrawn immediately, Skinner getting up off the bed.

“No! I didn’t mean don’t fuck me—”

Skinner standing by the side of the bed, wiping his hands clean, not looking at him. “Get dressed.”

“Sir—”

“I said: Get. Dressed.”

And Leave. Unsaid, but heard nonetheless. Only for today, perhaps, but to leave—

“Please, sir, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Skinner wasn’t looking at him.

Broad shoulders, long, strong back, so much tension, so much rejection.

For both of them.

Skinner had actually put it into words, had all but asked, and not just for what Mulder needed.

And he...

He was on the verge of destroying this, if he hadn’t already. All because he couldn’t actually say what he wanted, what they both knew he wanted. Couldn’t say what they’d been so cautiously edging towards for months now.

But he could, at least, tell another truth.

“I’m scared, sir,” he whispered. Repeated, louder: “I’m scared.”

Skinner turning towards him at last.

“Scared? Of what?”

Horrifying, to see that in Skinner’s eyes. “Not you. Of myself.”

Silence, waiting, listening properly, the only person who ever seemed to truly listen to him.

He’d said the first of it, unlocking the scarred old door inside himself, Skinner’s patience pushing it that bit farther ajar, light trickling in.

Skinner coming back to the bed now, looking at him, looking right into his eyes, reading him. Knowing him.

And it wasn’t the end, after all.

“What do you want, Fox?” asked low, and soft, and gentle.

“You,” Mulder told him, unflinching. “I want you, putting me across your knee. Punishing me, sir.” Deep breath. Easier to say this to Skinner than to hear it from himself. Taking strength from the steadiness, and confidence, in Skinner’s gaze.

Discovering that living up to Skinner’s faith in him was more important than hiding from a truth they both, after all, already knew, but still, his voice flickered like a candle in a gale. “Like a bad boy.”

Then Skinner was there, needing this as much as Mulder, needing it enough to let Mulder not have to say the final, irrevocable words, letting that be enough: Skinner, there, surging up onto the bed, hauling Mulder into a hard hug, holding him tight enough to hurt. Constriction easing, and he was being moved, pressed down across Skinner’s lap, being positioned just so.

A hand on his ass, only stroking him, promising





more, one more check, one last part before their covenant. "Is this what your father did?"

"God, no! Nothing like this. I was sent to my room, or ignored. Never anything like this."

Which according to his college books, explained everything.

Only it didn't.

Nothing explained why he was feeling soothed, inside, where turmoil was such an old lodger, he rarely even noticed it any more, save by its absence. Nothing explained why he needed this, and why someone else would want to give it to him, and frankly, he didn't much want to think about it. Not right now. Not when Skinner was touching him between his cheeks again, fingers teasing him, thrusting into him, where he was still slick from before.

A moment's stillness. And then: a hand landing on him, the sound more shocking than the sensation. At first. For the first half-dozen strokes, it was mild, mellow. Slowly, growing harder, and hotter, and wilder. Not mellow now, no, burning fierce and hot and hungry.

Perfect.

Under him, he could feel Skinner, hardness pressing into him every time the mirroring hardness of Skinner's hand smacked into his ass. Caught between a rock and a hard place, Mulder thought, and smiled. The smile grew dreamy, as Skinner kept up the rhythm, and gave Mulder what he wanted. Gave him what he feared.

Amazing, what a difference it made, to simply know what it was he wanted; what this was all about. What they'd been slowly skirting for so long.

The last smack, and then hands soothing him, slow, gentle circling.

"Fuck me," he murmured. "Please, fuck me."

Rolled onto his back, his legs lifted into the air, put over Skinner's shoulders.

"Say it, Fox."

Looking up, into brown eyes that knew he could do it, knew he could find the courage to face it, to say it.

"Fuck me, Daddy."

And Skinner slid his cock home. One long, smooth slide, and Mulder was filled. Complete.

He'd said it, and the Heavens hadn't fallen, and his father hadn't risen up to haunt him, and his dick hadn't fallen off. He'd said it. And it had got him Skinner inside him, hard, thick, hot. Needing him.

"Thank you, Daddy," he said, stroking the strong muscles of Skinner's chest, his upper arms.

His reward was seeing his words hit home; feeling his words' effect in the thrust of Skinner inside him.

The sky still hadn't fallen.

He'd been afraid of this? Of saying it out loud and having Skinner know? Of needing this? The fears slipped away, as Skinner filled his needs, as Skinner knew, and accepted him anyway. As Skinner met his openness with an openness Mulder had never expected to see. His own need, matched in Skinner's eyes.

He was being kissed, tongue thrusting deeply into his mouth, and he was being fucked, cock thrust deeply into his ass. Skinner stopped kissing him for a moment, Skinner's mouth open against his skin, Skinner's breath tingling as words were whispered into him. "You're mine," Skinner said, and Mulder felt those words hit home in their turn, in his turn; wondered if it showed in his eyes as much as it had in Skinner's.

He wanted to hear it again.

"You belong to me," Skinner told him, each word punctuated by a long thrust deep inside. "You are *mine*."

Small words, simple words, bearers of so complex a truth.

"Yes," Mulder said, lifting up to meet Skinner's downward thrust, "yes, Daddy."

"Nobody else can have you, Baby," Skinner said, his hand wrapping around Mulder's cock, pulling on him, hard and fast, the way Mulder loved best. "You're mine and nobody else's."

And it was true. Perfectly, simply true.

That was what he'd been truly afraid of. Scared, of needing, of wanting what he had wanted. Scared of the depth of hunger that would open up when he admitted what Skinner was to him.

Nothing compared to the fear of Skinner not wanting him. Of Skinner rejecting him, of Skinner turning him away.

Of Skinner wanting and needing him just as much.

But it was worth the fear, and the risk, to have Skinner inside him, like this. To have Skinner stroking his cock, like this. To have Skinner whispering words to him, like this. More than worth it, to hear the words Skinner was whispering to him.

One last touch, a hard squeeze on his cock, an unyielding thrust deep inside him, and he came.





Dissolving, into the whiteness streaming from his cock, into the whiteness of pure pleasure. Dissolving, into the new certainty of Skinner, claiming him.

He opened his eyes again, watched Skinner. Was allowed to watch Skinner, to see the naked hunger in those eyes, to see the bare need, to see Skinner lower all defenses and then, a few moments of kaleidoscoping sensations and emotions, to see as Skinner let pleasure claim him, too.

His legs were lowered, his thigh-muscles eased and caressed, his body turned onto his side and gathered into Skinner's embrace.

Skinner was rolling his nipple between fingers and thumb, the occasional sharp sting of nail a welcome brightness. His ass was still warm from his spanking, his hole still sensitized from being fucked, his back and shoulders were reminding him of the sting of the belt.

In other words, he felt wonderful.

There would be not a mark on him tomorrow, not a mark to betray what they'd done. Not a mark to betray what he'd said, and what they'd become.

He'd called Skinner 'Daddy.' And Skinner had wanted that as much as he had.

Daddy.

He'd said it. And been accepted. Hell, he'd been welcomed with open arms, literally. And he'd been possessed, figuratively.

"Daddy," he whispered, just to hear himself say it.

Was pulled into a tight embrace, was kissed, Skinner's hands cupping his ass, and was kissed again.

Nice to be wanted.

Nice? It was fucking fantastic.

They'd survived saying it; survived admitting it; survived this first, small beginning.

Maybe, just maybe, they could survive what he was beginning—just beginning to dare—to trust that they might both be feeling.

Maybe, just maybe, he'd say those words out loud too, one day.

But in the meantime, it was Sunday, June 15th, 1997, and he'd found the perfect present after all.

