

s o k o l

Near Dnepropetrovsk, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic
August 18, 1951

The airplane is a veteran of the Great Patriotic War, slow and steady. What little we would be able to hear over the engine's howl is deadened by my leather helmet. I am thrilled, imagining that maybe only six years ago proud Soviet soldiers jumped from this very craft, far behind the Fascists' lines in the middle of the night. I imagine what it would be like to clutch the rifle to my chest, ready my knife for the sentries guarding the heroic partisan prisoners. Take that, Fritzi, Soviet women fight too! There are eight of us, the best of the Young Pioneers' camp, with the old parachutes we carefully packed ourselves. Perhaps with this very parachute we won the war. The pilot and the instructor are women too-- on the ground, they told us Maria Feodorovna flew a Yak fighter and brought down three Fascist planes herself. Some of my co-jumpers are green. I am shaking, but it is with excitement. I want them to open the door, I want to see the sky from the inside.

Maria Feodorovna throttles the radial engine back, barely fast enough to stay airborne, little faster than a truck. Lena Abramova hauls the big side door open, and sunlight streams into the biplane's interior. Outside is nothing but a horizon of Ukrainian countryside eight thousand feet below. The green ones turn gray, but Lara the girl from Smolensk and I look at each other with wild smiles. I see Lena Abramova nod her head at me as she yells over the engine and wind to Maria Feodorovna.

"Look at that one, Masha! We have a little swallow for sure here!"

"Don't let her jump yet," the pilot meets my eyes. "Swallow nothing, she thinks she's a falcon!"

I am first out the door, they put me before Lara even. The plane falls up away from me as the wind tears at my face, and I spread my arms. I am in the sky.

Ya lastochka, ya tchaika, ya sokol.

I am a swallow, I am a seagull, I am a falcon...

* * *

s o k o l

May 23, 1961

five...four...three ...two...one...one
two...three...four...five...
come in... come in... come in...
LISTEN...LISTEN! ...COME IN!
COME IN... COME IN... TALK TO ME!
TALK TO ME!... I AM HOT!... I AM HOT!
WHAT?... FORTYFIVE?... WHAT?...
FORTYFIVE?... FIFTY?...
YES...YES...YES... BREATHING...
BREATHING... OXYGEN...
OXYGEN... I AM HOT... (THIS)
ISN'T THIS DANGEROUS?... IT'S ALL...
ISN'T THIS DANGEROUS?... IT'S ALL...
YES...YES...YES... HOW IS THIS?
WHAT?... TALK TO ME!... HOW SHOULD I
TRANSMIT? YES...YES...YES...
WHAT? OUR TRANSMISSION BEGINS NOW...
FORTYONE... THIS WAY... OUR
TRANSMISSION BEGINS NOW...
FORTYONE... THIS WAY... OUR
TRANSMISSION BEGINS NOW...
FORTYONE... YES... I FEEL HOT...
I FEEL HOT... IT'S ALL... IT'S HOT...
I FEEL HOT... I FEEL HOT... I FEEL HOT...
... I CAN SEE A FLAME!... WHAT?...
I CAN SEE A FLAME!... I CAN SEE A
FLAME!...
I FEEL HOT... I FEEL HOT... THIRTYTWO...
THIRTYTWO... FORTYONE... FORTYONE
AM I GOING TO CRASH?... YES...YES... I FEEL HOT!...
I FEEL HOT!... I WILL REENTER!... I WILL REENTER...

sokol

S O K O L

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s o k o l

i

r e - e n t r y

Alexandria, VA
Monday, May 25 1998
4:14 AM

Fox Mulder hadn't been sleeping when the phone rang.

It was too warm in the room-- his lover's apartment had high ceilings, excellent sunlight, and no air conditioning. Beside him, she slept through the damp heat of early summer with a single sheet pulled low over one hip and leg, a drapery of interest for an artist's eye accentuating rather than hiding her nakedness. At four-thirty in the morning, dawn still waited. Streetlight glow allowed him to distinguish the colors of her body in blues and grays, and make shine the light perspiration across her full breasts and strong shoulders. He lay on his back, slightly separate, in the unsaid understanding that the warmth of bodies is best shared on colder nights than this one. The changes in her night-limned repose told him that he had drifted back and forth into sleep, sometimes seeing and sometimes missing her movements.

Dana Scully had whimpered drowsy disappointment as the ringing demanded attention, something less than razor-sharp as she slithered comfortably across the lover's body in her bed. Naked skin pressed close in warm, humid friction, and she

casually threw her right arm over his shoulder and neck while reaching across him for the phone.

"...hello...?"

"Special Agent Scully?" A man's voice.

"Yes?" Her voice stiffened slightly, remembering that she had been that woman up until late last evening and would have to be again in a few hours. For now, she was still more aware of Mulder's lips and nose pressing against her bicep, smelling and tasting her skin.

"I need to speak to Special Agent Mulder, please."

"Is this the duty desk? I assume Agent Mulder is at home..."

"This isn't the duty desk, and I know he's there. I need to speak to him, please." Dana rolled over on her back, on top of Mulder's hips, holding up the receiver without comment. His eyes widened slightly, and he took the phone slowly.

"Mulder," he said. She could hear his interest growing, almost see his mind beginning to work.

"Who is this?" He was sitting up straighter now. Dana began gathering her thoughts and planning how they would need to move.

"Why should I believe you?" It was obvious that he didn't receive a response. His hand dropped, placing the phone back in its cradle. His other hand was stroking the softly muscled relief of Scully's belly as she lay across him. Her head leaned back as she contemplated the ceiling, feeling Mulder's touch and distracted eyes on her.

"Light plane crash, Washington. Less than an hour ago. Apparently we should be there. He said to do an autopsy."

"Did you recognize the voice?"

"Whoever it was knew I was here." He felt the small laugh ripple through her back into his body, her shoulders shifting slightly as she turned towards him.

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"Good Lord, Mulder, someone thinks we're sleeping together. Whatever shall we do?" In the dark, he could feel the laugh, couldn't see the moment after when her eyes, now clear and awake, stared into a dim corner of the room. "So do you think we should go?"

"Skinner's going to hand me my ass if we do."

"Nothing else, just the plane crash?"

"Yeah."

"We could check it with him first."

"No, I doubt it. Skinner seems to like us where we are." He felt the laugh again. "Well, maybe not right where we are."

She rolled over and rested the point of her chin against his sternum.

"They knew we were here, Mulder."

"I think I said that."

"So we agree." He felt part of her standing up already, opening the door, letting the light into their room.

"Stranger things have happened."

* * *

Olympic National Forest
Near Grisdale, Washington
1140 AM PST

She wished she had brought an umbrella as she stepped out of the car and a heavy hand of rain began patting her down. Her mind refused to recognize that it was barely eight AM and she was most of a continent away from the bed she had left unmade nine hours ago. She watched Mulder scanning yellow fire and blue police

slickers, trying to figure out who was in charge. They had driven up a fire road to get to this isolated area of the park, and Mulder immediately loped off towards the knot of milling emergency personnel. He throve on initial impressions, and usually made his mind up before speaking to anyone (frequently including her) about the issue at hand.

The only other time they had investigated an air crash there had been a gigantic field of debris and bodies scattered over a wide area, a grand-scale, CNN-helicopter-shot disaster. That had been an airliner, and so she had expected something rather different-- a small, broken aircraft, a few body bags, with the homely air of mundane tragedy about the scene.

What she saw was a crater, or perhaps more of a scar, fifteen yards wide, in the thick underbrush thirty yards away. There was a vague scent of charred wood and burnt leaves held low by the rain. They had driven up a winding, single-lane access road, dodging around two fire trucks coming the other way. Trees. Everywhere trees, reaching down from low-hanging mist, dull green supports for a dull gray sky.

Nothing good had ever happened to them in the woods, Scully thought. She took a deep breath and changed her stride, stepping so long it made her ass hurt. She feared she had a tendency to look like she was shuffling, especially when swathed in a long coat, or a way of stepping delicately when she was outdoors. Scully imagined looking girly, prissy, out of her element, and hated the mental image.

She hated even more that she was thinking about it.

Spotting a pickup truck with the fire marshal's crest on it, she put on her most purposeful look. They had ignored the regional office in Seattle entirely, calling the sheriff's and fire marshal's offices directly. No one questioned the presence of the FBI agents-- when there was no obvious crime or collar, no one was too attached to their jurisdiction.

First impressions, Agent Scully. Only one guy in a jacket saying "Fire Marshal" on the back. Easy enough. Project yourself, Dana, so he doesn't turn around too close and see right over you. Start speaking a little farther away than he is tall, slowing one step. 'Distant' can be a virtue.

"Excuse me, Marshal Wyckham?" A blank minor authority, somewhere in his early

fifties, going soft and large in the middle.

"Yes?" Good, a good five feet away, he didn't have to look down to look at me.

"Special Agent Dana Scully, I'm with the Bureau, we spoke on the phone." She stopped a bit out of handshake reach, never liking the gesture, the reminder of smallness.

"Yes, I was waiting for you to show up. How many on your team, Special Agent Scully?"

"Just myself and Special Agent Mulder for the time being." His eyes flick up to where I know Mulder is probably alternating between kneeling, pacing, flipping his overcoat back from his hips with both hands, and generally orbiting the catch of the day like an erratic comet. "It all depends on what we have here."

"I don't know. It got called in as a light plane of some kind, but it's definitely not. It looks like it came in fast, nearly vertical, and pretty much shattered when it hit the ground. It's too small to be a light plane anyway, and it doesn't even look like it had wings."

"Was there anyone in it, a pilot?"

"Yeah, one body, I think. It's pretty, uh, we haven't found everything yet."

"I'll be wanting to do an autopsy as soon as possible."

"Well, we'll be taking down what we got right away. I don't think the county coroner is exactly gonna mind givin' over to you on this one. We actually get more than a few small plane crashes here. A lot of people commute by air and there's stuff out to logging camps and what-all. None of them really look anything like this, though."

Mulder was heading back towards them, leaning slightly forward in his standard expression of discreet urgency intended only for her. She glanced back at the rather small scatter of wreckage that at this distance looked very charred for the evidence of a minor brush fire quickly extinguished by rain. Scully turned back to Wyckham.

"When are you expecting the FAA inspectors up here?"

"Probably by early evening."

Scully handed him two of her business cards.

"Could you please pass this on to the chief inspector when they arrive? We'll probably be at the county coroner's and you can reach me on my cell. Thanks a lot for your cooperation." Mulder glanced over at Scully as she finished and caught the marshal's eye before speaking.

"Marshal, were there any eyewitnesses to the crash?"

"None I know of. Some campers reported hearing the impact and then seeing the fire. Apparently there's air traffic records too, but that'll be the FAA's job, not mine. I'm just sort of the man on the spot here."

"Just one more thing, sir. What time was this reported?"

"Well, just before three, would have come down probably two-thirty, I guess, time it took them to get to a phone."

Two-thirty plus three time zones equals a good hour after my phone rang this morning, Scully thought. She didn't need to glance at Mulder, nor he at her, to both conclude that they'd worry about this when their apparently clairvoyant informant was less likely to be within arm's reach.

"Thanks." Mulder strode off towards the rental car as Scully arranged to meet the ambulance carrying the remains at the coroner's office. They had taken to carrying small, plain cameras in their travel kits, and Mulder began working his way through two rolls of film over the spill of twisted, blackened metal. He noted a smell of burning rubber but nothing that smelled like fuel. Definitely the remnant of an instrument panel, with a small number of analog instruments and toggle switches on it. It looked kind of like somebody's failed science project, he thought, crouching down to snap several close pictures of the panel and its backside. Bolts and machine screws and hose clamps, very ordinary artifacts.

"Mulder, I'm going to go down in the ambulance and get started as soon as I can."

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"Okay, Scully, I'll meet you down there. I'm going to try and get some of this looked at in the next couple of hours. You go do that corpse-cuttin' voodoo that you do..."

"Which one of us is going to call Skinner?"

"I think he likes yelling at me more. I'll tell him I tied you up and carried you onto the airplane." He looked up at her, lips cracked into a slight smile, and his eyes suddenly deepened and invited her to fall in. Uh-uh, Mulder, she thought. Not making me swoon on company time. She ran her tongue across her lower lip, a move she saved only for when he really needed to be reminded of his place. It worked again.

"You just tell him that, G-man," Scully half-whispered as he grinned in defeat. "I'll wait for you down at the coroner's office." She straightened up, and a brisk, efficient FBI agent walked towards a waiting ambulance.

* * *

Cypress Rest Funeral Parlour
Grisdale, WA
2:50 PM

"Subject is an adult female, definitely Caucasian, probably between 20 and 40 years of age. Measurement of height, weight must be estimated, subject is of medium build. Torso is partially dismembered and decapitated. Limbs and head have not been recovered. Cause of death appears to be massive trauma consistent with an air crash. There were fragmentary remains of what looked like a pressure suit at the scene. The body shows signs of second- and third- degree burns which appear to be post-mortem judging from placement and lividity."

The initial description always helped, devolving the 'body' to a 'subject'. The initial visual survey also began the process of narrowing her vision, looking for detail. Scully didn't step closer to the table yet; too soon to concentrate on one feature.

It was difficult not to try-- Grisdale's funeral parlor doubled as the morgue and county coroner's autopsy theater, and the accoutrements of North America's business of remembrance were stacked on plain green metal shelves around her. This wasn't an unusual experience, and Dana had long since decided that the most

ghoulish autopsy she had ever performed would still not make her capable of being an embalmer. I can cut them up, she thought, stick probes in them, take little slices of them and study them. A twenty-minute discussion of tooth marks on a liver? I'm your woman. Put shoes on a dead man? Not a chance.

"Coloration of the dismemberment wounds and burns is unusual, as is their apparent texture...?"

Now that's a start, something to look for. She moved closer to the table, bending down.

"Yes, very unusual. It's as if there has been some sort of melting or cauterization, but without evidence of burns or charring?" They simply didn't look like wounds; where there should be torn muscle and ragged tissue caked with dried blood there was only solid-looking mass. The strange flesh (but there's no such thing as 'flesh,' there's muscle and fat and bone woven together intricately... not this...) was an oddly rosy, healthy color for a corpse that had suffered such violence, yet within the wounds there seemed to be almost a total absence of blood.

She explored the remnants of the left shoulder with the longest probe, feeling the tissue respond springily. "It looks almost bloodless... there's no sign of muscle or connective tissue or even subdermal fatty tissues... there's only one vein or artery and it's almost a half inch in diameter, and the bone looks almost unformed..."

She clicked off the recorder, and tried not to notice the box of silk corsages sitting next to her cell phone on the shelves behind her.

"Mulder? It's me. I think you might want to see this for yourself."

* * *

Mulder didn't try to conceal the appraising look that accompanied his entrances. Starting at her face, flicking downward once, then back up, a brief linger on her hips and again at her breasts, then casually meeting her eyes for a silent exchange before turning to the matter at hand. Yep, it's all still there, Mulder, glancing casually up at him. If there were other men in the room, he made a habit of inserting random icy glances at them in his leisurely trail back up her body. It was a smug, possessive, wildly unprofessional gesture. She had gotten over hating it, largely because the

way his eyes traveled made her feel six inches taller.

"I don't smell it." Mulder's observations came out loud around her more often now, giving hints of the wild leaps he made, the rapid associations. Usually they started with something mundane, like this. She noticed that his coat and pantlegs were still muddy from clambering around the crash site.

"That's because it's not a body, Mulder." He moved in closer to the table, and she offered him a pair of latex gloves.

"No, thanks, I'll take your word for it. What do you mean?"

She pulled off the cap and stepped back, arms crossing.

"It's not a body. It wasn't ever a living human being. I don't really know what it is, though. It's human tissue, or several kinds of tissue as far as I can tell, arranged to resemble a human body. But it's just all wrong, it's like a child made it out of clay, I can't think of a better way to put it. There are undifferentiated organs in the torso, no chest cavity, sort of a limited skeletal structure, almost no circulatory system, and no nervous or endocrine system except a spinal cord that's outside the spine, which incidentally has only eight vertebrae. There's no connective tissue, and it doesn't even look like there's muscle or fat. It's almost a solid block of, of dermis, of skin."

"Show me." Scully revealed the bizarrely sterile object to him, the bean-shaped masses in the near-solid block of the torso, the blocky, undefined bone masses, and the hoselike veins running from the 'heart', one into each extremity. Mulder's normally twitchy stomach didn't raise any issues with him, a combination of his affinity for anything bizarre and the almost total lack of odor except for a vague whiff of charred skin.

"Where did it come from?"

"I don't know. It certainly wasn't ever alive, I know that. It couldn't breathe, pump blood, have nerve reactions, or even move, as far as I can tell. Essentially, it's a doll." Scully stripped off her gloves and picked up the camera she'd used to take the gross pathology slides, removing the film.

"I don't even know where to get these developed. I've taken samples, but I don't

have equipment here for DNA typing and I'm concerned about sending them out. I don't know what I'm going to tell the FAA inspectors."

"Because we're here unofficially?"

"Because this is really strange, Mulder. I don't know what to tell anyone and I'm afraid of who they might tell." She looked back at the table, slightly distracted. "And I think this is one of those things..."

One of those things that we won't be able to prove happened in 72 hours, Mulder thought as he walked over behind her. As Scully washed her hands, he gently stroked the fine lines of her neck, initially sliding downward millimeters from her skin to feel the faint downy hair there against his fingers and return the other side of the sensation.

"Mmm. So what did you find out?" She stopped moving, leaning slightly against the edge of the sink.

"That if we're back in DC by tomorrow morning Skinner will consider it vacation time. Good thing you took some pictures, we can have him over for travel slides." The tension of discovery and further question knotted the fine intricacies of her shoulders, and Mulder's fingers probed gently into the familiar quandaries.

"Ahhh... you can't do that in the lab in DC, Mulder, I don't want to go back..." She waited three, four seconds of company time, drawing the sensation out. "...how about the crash site?" His hands stopped abruptly, and Scully turned around. She felt what nearly amounted to a 'click' from Mulder, a withdrawal. Leaning back now, heels of her hands against the stainless steel table, she slipped her small feet in between his, and the physical contact brought his head up and his eyes to hers.

"The wreckage is a Soviet space capsule, called a Vostok," he began. "It was the Soviet version of the Mercurys, like John Glenn. It's basically a tin can with a man inside. It looks like it suffered a lot of damage on reentry and then its parachute didn't open. It would have hit the ground at over five hundred miles per hour." Scully's eyes widened slightly.

"When did you become an expert on forensic identification of spaceships?"

"Actually, it was a miracle of the Internet. Perko's Copymatic, your photos to disk in an hour and rental computers. I emailed some of the pictures to Langly and they called me back with the ID." Scully couldn't help grinning slightly. Of course they would know, she thought. "I don't remember for sure, but I don't think the Russians ever lost one of these thirty-five years ago, though they may not have admitted it."

"A thirty-year-old Russian spaceship? That would explain the crash at least within the realm of possibility, Mulder, but it doesn't explain this."

"And it doesn't explain why we got tipped off probably over an hour before the crash actually took place."

"The marshal could have been mistaken about the time, Mulder."

"No, I checked. I talked to the parks service guy where the call was made and talked to the campers. Definitely no later than two-thirty, local time. That's five-thirty in DC. We were already checking our bags at Dulles by then." Scully shifted her feet slightly against Mulder's insteps.

"Scully?"

One-third curious, one-third habit, and one-third just because he was Mulder, her brow arched a familiar response.

"I'm supposed to see the air traffic records later this evening, but somehow I doubt that will happen. Can you take extra tissue samples?" He lowered his voice to a bare whisper, just above mouthing the words.

"Something we can take." She glanced over towards her blazer hung by the door, then back at Mulder, the corners of her mouth turning upwards slightly.

"I'm just going to finish up here. Where will you be?" They separated slightly, Mulder straightening up.

"I'll wait for you out front. I'll ask around and see where there is to stay around here." As he walked through the door, he brushed his fingertips against the pocket of her blazer, feeling three small, square sample cases inside.

* * *

The policies quite clearly said separate accommodations, though, like most other fine print, that didn't come into play until you were already in trouble for something else writ larger. Since they'd put themselves in a position to consider non-Bureau-approved sleeping arrangements about six weeks before, they'd only been allowed to leave the DC area overnight twice, and only spent two nights in motels.

The first night they'd been exhausted from tramping through a polluted urban river valley all day, and had simply zonked out half-dressed, one's arm thrown across another's stomach.

The second, though, they'd definitely finished undressing.

* * *

They ate quietly, the same variations on a cheeseburger and fries and a chicken burger and salad that appeared on nearly every menu they had ever seen. It was still raining, or raining again, she didn't know which. Mulder apparently had nothing to say.

"So are you going to try to convince Skinner to let us stay on this?" she started.

"Do you think I should?"

"You'll forgive me if I have no idea how to react to that."

"What do you mean, Scully?" Mulder paused around a mouthful of burger.

"Skinner's had us tied down in DC for weeks, since..." she began. He grinned slightly at her.

"Since he found out." Scully remembered the Assistant Director's refusal to acknowledge any impropriety while making it extremely clear that he knew exactly what was going on.

Mulder remembered differently. He'd long suspected, and tried to avoid manipulating, Skinner's attempts to support their work. He imagined that Skinner

wished he could break the chain of compromises he himself had had to make over the years. But it was clear that something had changed for Skinner as well. A couple of months ago, he'd bluntly suggested to Mulder that he (or they-- the assumption that they were a couple had been implicit) consider some other assignment besides the X-Files. He had gone as far as offering him a promotion to a desk job. Mulder hadn't answered yes or no. Nor had he mentioned it to Scully, which he'd rationalized by saying it was 'before,' which was true by a couple of days.

Since then, Skinner had more or less ensured that the X-Files was a desk job.

"Mulder, this is the first thing we've had that's even close to an X-file, or even worthy of investigation, since I came back to work."

"What's your point?"

"Well, I'm expecting something a little different from you, based on experience."

"This doesn't feel right, Scully. It's too easy."

"Too easy."

"No one's fighting us here. We waltzed up to the crash site, took pictures, ID'ed everything, talked to more people than can conveniently disappear, and we were specifically instructed to do an autopsy on something that turned out to be neither human nor alien."

"Either way, I don't think there's much doubt that this is an X-file, Mulder. Even if Skinner calls us back to DC I've arranged for shipment of the remains, and that alone-- even just the autopsy results from today-- should be enough to justify keeping the file open."

As they left the restaurant Dana felt something brushing against the sleeve of her jacket, tickling her wrist under the hem, and then Mulder's long fingers curling around hers. She looked around quickly, for whatever he was signaling to her. His hand didn't move, and swayed just a little with their pace.

"I distinctly remember Skinner telling me that we were on vacation time until tomorrow morning."

* * *

The evening has kept up the day's steady drizzle, pattering on my leather jacket. We don't have an umbrella, and Grisdale doesn't have the awnings and overhangs of Seattle or Portland. We're holding hands, outside, for the world to see. We'll get back to the hotel, and her damp hair will curl slightly when it starts to dry. She'll take her weights into the other room, and I'll turn on the TV while I have the laptop glowing beside me. I'd love to watch her, but she'd feel self-conscious and stop. Maybe I'll buy a paper, and we'll trade sections back and forth. She's looking at the windows of the places we pass. I run my thumb across her palm, fingers staying entwined, and she looks up at me. Blue can be a warm color.

We're out of control again. It's all happening to us. Come here, Agent Mulder, look behind the curtain, bring that pretty partner of yours with you.

Come and play, Mulder. It's a big game.

We act in the expectation that something will go wrong, assuming the worst. Extra tissue samples, leaving DC without permission that we know we'll be denied. And she's doing it too now, wondering why I'm not pushing further and harder.

* * *

"You must be Agent Mulder." The FAA inspector was obviously junior, probably the proud owner of a newly minted engineering degree. She was a small, round young Asian woman who gave the impression of being about to suddenly burst into wild activity starting at the tips of her dancing fingers, throwing the pen dangling from a plastic cord on her wrist into a propeller frenzy.

"Yeah, and you are..."

"Sherry Tsang, FAA. So what brought the FBI out here? Not that this isn't looking stranger and stranger all the time. But I don't see any terrorists or, you know, drug dealers, or..?" The young woman faded off into a chuckle and Mulder got the impression that her brain had run far ahead of even her racing speech.

"Agent Scully and I are sort of a special investigative unit. You've seen the wreckage,

then."

"Oh, yes, we got most of the collection done this evening, I'm just, sort of, you know, trying to keep up with all the administrative stuff before we get back to it. Going to be an all-nighter for sure." She pushed the sheaf of papers in front of her to one side of the fake woodgrain table. The FAA team had put down stakes in the same hotel as Mulder and Scully, making its coffee shop a logical meeting place.

"Do you think it's a Vostok?"

"How did you know?" The young woman's voice came out so rapidly that Mulder felt his brain had to undertake some process of translation, and he felt himself speaking more slowly, trying to balance her.

"I had a friend look at some of the pictures I took this morning, sort of off the record."

"Oh, no kidding. This will just be a mess if everything gets out really quickly. It's almost like archaeology or something. I mean there's been lots of stories about this kind of thing, but to really see it?" She had finally settled down in the bench on her side of the table, movement restricted to fiddling with her pen.

"Stories about what?"

"Russian space accidents," the young woman replied. "This craft is really old, Agent Mulder, no more than 1962 by my guess. And I, uh, didn't talk to your partner directly, but the fire marshal told me that the, uh, body looks like it was a woman."

"That was what it looked like."

"Well, if it was, she would have been the first woman in space."

"Ms. Tsang, do you have any idea why this would have come down here, now, after thirty-five years?" Mulder asked.

"It could be a lot of things. Gradual orbital decay, maybe a collision with a piece of space junk that altered the orbit it was in, maybe a venting of gas from one of the oxygen tanks that acted like a maneuvering thruster, I don't really know. The whole

trajectory and probably the original orbit have to have been detected by radar and catalogued at some point. It'll just be a matter of sort of backtracking to find out where it's been."

"What do you mean by catalogued?"

"Well, every object in orbit, as far as we know, is cataloged and assigned a number when it's placed there or detected by radar. We're more careful now but there's still a lot of junk--boosters and shrouds and stuff from the 1960s. But something this size should have been detected a long time ago."

"Nobody would have figured out what it was before now?"

"Oh, probably the Soviets just said it was an old satellite or booster or something to cover up the failure. Nobody would know unless they actually got up close to it, and that doesn't happen very often."

"But it's possible that someone knew what it was and where it was before the crash?" Mulder leaned back, stretching his arms out sideways. Tsang seemed to relax slightly as well, as if taking a signal from him.

"I suppose. I don't know why they'd keep it a secret, though, not now. It's more of a historical oddity than anything." Her speech slowed perceptibly, and she seemed to notice at last that she had a glass of water in front of her. She poked at the ice cubes with her pen. "Can I ask you a question, Agent Mulder?" He nodded.

"You still didn't tell me why your 'special investigative unit' is here." She put the wet tip of her pen in her mouth for a minute, and then regarded him, elbows on the table.

"Ms. Tsang, I can't really talk about an ongoing investigation..."

"It's my ongoing investigation too."

"All I can do is promise to keep in touch with you about anything that might have some bearing on your work."

"This is likely to work the other way around and you know it. When you decide why

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you're here, tell me." Mulder blinked once, slowly, as the young engineer stood up and strode purposefully past him towards the hotel's lobby. The footsteps that approached were slower, and familiar.

"That looked like it could have gone better," Scully said as she slid into the bench Tsang had just left. "What was that about?"

"It all happened so fast..."

Scully looked vaguely amused. He looked sheepish.

"All I found out is that it's not impossible for that wreckage to be what Langly said it was. You?"

She shrugged uncharacteristically.

"Went over my work from the autopsy, transcribed. I'm not ashamed to say I'm exhausted. We've been up for twenty hours." Mulder nodded assent, and slid out of the bench. Scully followed, rubbing her temples.

* * *

In a plain hallway with brown carpet and no eyes to see, the tall, dark man says something to his small, bright partner, who smiles at him with a hint of indulgence as they unlock adjoining doors. Showers run, his briefly, hers continuing, and just over a minute after it stops, the man reemerges, rapping gently at her door. It opens in front of him, and there are a few soft words and another indulgent smile as he enters. And then, with no eyes to see, night is briefly theirs.

* * *

Tuesday, May 26, 1998
4:32 AM

Dana glanced up at herself in the bathroom mirror-- just once. I will ask it no more questions. Do I look sick? Do I look alive? Do I look like I've been awake all night rearranging my bookcase and wondering if I can summon up enough of a headache to justify a couple of codeine, 30mg?

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She'd padded gently out of the room they had chosen, having slipped out of his sleeping embrace. Mulder loved to cling to her after sex, whispering dreams and endearments into her hair. It was a strange, quiet afterglow to lovemaking often tinged with shared humor, or occasionally desperate hunger. He would say wonderful, romantic, fantastic things, his voice slowly drifting and becoming more breath against her than sound. She had heard about the house he imagined, a trip to somewhere where they could look at mountains from a hundred miles away.

When his breathing deepened and evened, unless she was utterly exhausted, Dana would slip from his embrace and head quietly to the bathroom. The act of coming back to bed and arranging herself around Mulder's sleeping body was something she needed to do, though she wondered about the source of the need. Sex had been astonishingly easy for them, so much so that Dana found herself looking for evidence that the fulfillment of her body's desires was clouding her judgment regarding him, regarding them. We're still in this giddy, sexual phase, she reminded herself, not thinking completely straight. I've just temporarily forgotten that he's crazy.

To lie drowsy, feeling satisfied and comfortably entwined with her lover's body and mind, could not be allowed so easily. She would come back into her bedroom, or his bedroom, and regard his sleeping body for a moment as she forced herself to consider that she was about to lie down with Fox Mulder, her partner of five years. At first, she had found the thought disturbing her slightly, and she would lie down pensively, experimentally. The mirror would call to her (dana, dana, mommy,) wanting to hear more questions.

The experimentation had showed that Mulder-slumber was apparently contagious, because with him, she fell asleep as though she'd been hit over the head with a brick. It was a welcome change from the bizarre sleep patterns and occasional self-prescription of Ativan she'd developed over the past few years, though she wondered if Mulder had noticed that she didn't fall asleep on his shoulder anymore.

Now, after two months, she used the post-coital moments alone with herself, or gazing at him, for quiet and strictly limited reflection. Just the facts, Dana; don't over-think. I called him Agent Mulder today, and we are back on a real X-file.

We spoke on cell phones and over an autopsy table, and half an hour ago I watched his beautiful face between my thighs, and took him inside me. I'm on a case, sleeping

naked, to which I think I have been completely converted.

As she reached up to turn out the bathroom light, she noticed that the covers on the other bed had been turned down, and there was a large envelope or folder with two small objects on top of it lying on the clean motel sheets.

Mulder?

It hadn't been that way before they'd returned from meeting the FAA inspector, and she'd been quite close to him since he'd returned. They had slept quietly since midnight, then awoke together as if by agreement at about four and wordlessly begun to make love. She walked out into the unused bedroom, turning on the bedside lamp. The light sloping down from under its shade made her suddenly conscious of her pale nakedness, and Scully looked around the room quickly. It was a large, heavy envelope, tied at the top. Two plastic-wrapped mints lay on top of it, on a sheet from the 'Olympia National Forest and Area Attractions' notepad that lay by the phone.

The notepaper read 'Room Service' in quick, neat ballpoint capitals.

* * *

Olympia National Forest
Early morning

There was a powerful wash from the rotor blades as the chopper dusted off, flashes from its nav lights dragging dance floor patterns across the uneven ground and the eight white semi trailers ranked in the hasty bulldozer clearing. The man who had disembarked glanced towards the vague glow beginning on the horizon, then lingered on an array of mobile radars and communications aerials. There was a treble buzz over the midrange lead of the chopper's turbines, generators chugging away and pumping diesel exhaust into the federally protected forest air.

He dug into his pocket unconsciously, tapping a cigarette out of a slightly bent pack.

The man who came up to him, oblivious to the spinning gusts from the departing flier, wore an unexpectedly bright nylon jacket over a dark, finely cut suit with no lapels and a Nehru collar. His shaved, severely formed head tilted forward slightly

to allow him to peer over the top of fashionable gold wire glasses.

"You've arrived."

His voice was Indian-accented, with a faint tinge of BBC. One hand stretched out in an obvious greeting-- too high to shake, heading for a shoulder.

"What's he doing here?" The smoking man didn't respond to the greeting, instead slashing his cigarette in the direction of the other's young companion. Black leather, black jeans, a black glove, and an expression of smug false earnestness. He nodded slightly, prettily.

"He is working with me now," the dark-skinned man replied, closing beside the smoker, who pulled away to avoid the comradely hand that reached for his shoulder. "I had heard you were unwell."

"He's dangerous."

Again, the smoker ignored the pleasantries. They began to walk towards the nearest trailer, where fatigue-clad bodies moved under awnings stretched out from both sides. The younger man took up station ten paces behind, after watching the lights of the chopper dip beneath the treeline to the west.

"It's often said that you're dangerous, my friend." The Indian beckoned to an orderly, who ran out towards them with a clipboard. "Mr. Krycek is well paid, and that is the best way to ensure his sort of loyalty, don't you think...?"

* * *

"Krycek," Mulder started to crumple the paper, then turned it over on top of the folder and began smoothing it out. "It's fucking Krycek." He leapt off the bed, rapidly pulling on jeans, t-shirt, falling back on the bed to pull on his hiking boots.

"Mulder, wait. We don't know when he was here. He could be anywhere by now. How do you know?"

"Last time he dropped by my apartment he left me a note outside my door." A smoky trail of casual bitterness carried his words to wherever Krycek would be.

"It's him. And... he'd do this; he'd come here. When we're here." When we're making love, Dana thought. She imagined Alex Krycek's cold, flat eyes looking up slightly at the sound of her soft cries as Mulder drank from her. He would not smile, show no more emotion than he would at a car starting or a furnace clicking on. "Scully... I wasn't sure before, it seemed too easy, so I didn't tell you. I'm sure now. It was him on the phone, too, at your apartment."

Dana sat down on their bed, pulling on her sweater.

"Let's just go. He has to be around here somewhere. It's a small town."

She didn't look at him.

* * *

Grisdale was a small town, but large enough, apparently, that Alex Krycek could disappear in it quite handily. The hotel clerk who had to be roused out of bed obviously hadn't seen anyone, and there was hardly anywhere else to check at that hour. That didn't stop Mulder from standing outside the coffee shop, gazing up and down the main street, after Scully arrowed through the door.

Scully sat across from the package, one finger hooked through the handle of a coffee mug. The morning waitress walking away from her glanced at Mulder with a worried expression.

Yes, I'm in shit. Deep shit. Glad you noticed

Mulder picked up the envelope, pulling at the red cord that bound it. It was marked 'FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY-PLEASE REUSE!' and covered in meaningless reception stamps.

"I'm sorry. I was hoping I was wrong. It was early. I was out of it. I hoped I imagined it. I should have told you."

She was silent, and a brief lash of her gaze was acknowledgment and reminder before it turned down to the envelope. Taking his release from her, Mulder pulled out the contents: a sheaf of papers clipped together and some sort of computer disk. Zip disk, she remembered. Black-and-white photographs. She grabbed at them,

flipping through photos of blackened metal and charred wood (wood?) washed up on a narrow scrubby beach.

"Mulder, is this another crash?"

"Twelve, thirteen days ago. Eleven before the one we came here for." Mulder flipped through the loose, mismatched papers. "It's some sort of partial report, an investigation of the crash site. Scully, it looks like this was only forty miles from here..."

"Yes, you should have told me. Your suspicions are as important as anything else."

Mulder started to open his mouth, no doubt for another apology. There was a faint desperation in his eyes.

"This isn't the time for this discussion, Mulder. You know what I think." She scanned the partial map clipped into the sheaf, trying to make out the ballpoint scrawl on it. "This is one of the naval weapons ranges to the west."

"These documents are military... it's not a complete report. It looks like someone just grabbed a handful of documents out of a bigger file." He studied the map, pulling the top of it over towards him while leaving it in Scully's hand.

"Mulder, I don't think we should..."

"Oh. No, no, no way, Scully. We're not going. There aren't any roads out there, and I'll bet it's not worth the kind of shit we'll be in with Skinner to get out there twelve days after the fact. These papers are a tease, establishes the authenticity. Whatever the good stuff is, it'll be on this." He held up the zip disk. "We can do that in Washington, where we're supposed to be."

Scully picked at two pieces of toast for ten minutes, her partner gazing carefully out the window while stuffing eggs into his mouth.

"Flight out of Tacoma's at twelve-thirty?"

"Yeah." Mulder's cell phone trilled as he held the coffee shop door for Scully, and he crouched under the small awning.

"Mulder."

Scully heard a rapid pulse of an agitated female voice. "Hang on, I signed for what?" Mulder replied. "What's going on?" Three sharp expressions of anger she could hear from two feet away. Mulder's lips curled back from his teeth. "I'm on my way..." Mulder jogged the few steps to the car, and she had to sprint to keep up.

"What's going on?" He spun the tires on the wet pavement even as she asked.

"Same old fucking same old is what's going on.."

* * *

FBI Headquarters
Washington, DC
11:43 AM EST

"Walter, there's an urgent call for you on line two." Kim would probably have mentioned if it was Mulder, he thought. Mulder will be calling soon, looking for an angle, some kind of justification to stay out there investigating whatever the hell it is he thinks he's on to.

"Thank you Kimberly, I'll take it." Of course, Scully's just as likely to start pulling that crap now. She's stopped apologizing for him and started cheerleading. He punched line two slightly harder than necessary.

"Mr. Skinner. It's been a while."

"Who is this?"

"You know who this is." Walter could almost smell smoke curling out of the telephone.

"I don't think I ever got your name. I was hoping to send flowers."

"I don't have time for games, Mr. Skinner. You've been in contact with Agents Mulder and Scully?"

"Is that any concern of yours?" You had a bullet in your chest, you bastard. Die.

"I'll be brief. The lead they are following is not one which they will be permitted to pursue. They have received information from a rogue element, one over whom I have no control. Their presence and activities are being tolerated only because of my intervention on their behalf."

"I'm supposed to believe this?"

"Mr. Skinner, if this were a novel I would say it doesn't matter whether you believe me or not, but the fact is that it does. If Mulder and Scully continue with this investigation they will be in tremendous danger, and the indulgence they are often allowed will not be permitted." Skinner heard him puff once.

"I'll pass that along."

"You and I both know that would be essentially the same as shooting them." Walter thought he might have heard the smoker almost chuckle.

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"It doesn't matter to me what you do, as long as you play your part and do it. Just get them out of Washington State and off this lead. Goodbye, Mr. Skinner."

Walter Skinner's large hands carefully steepled in front of him after setting the phone in its cradle.

He wished he knew them better, some days. If Sharon were alive, and if he and Sharon had had a real marriage, maybe it would be different somehow. At least there'd be a basis, a pretext for some kind of human contact, some way to acknowledge the connection.

But Sharon was dead, and human contact was the last thing they thought of outside of each other. He'd caught them out once, exactly once, and it was enough to know. He'd stepped into the basement, looking up and seeing them standing two inches from each other, the space increasing. Scully's hands were dropping from Mulder's shoulders, Mulder's hand from her ass. Mulder's facial expression, as always, said

nothing. In the second before Scully flustered, between when she saw him and when she remembered what they were all supposed to be, she looked like an angry teenager daring him to scold her. Of course, it worked both ways. Scully knew Skinner carried condoms in case he got a chance to score in a hotel bar, and Skinner knew Mulder didn't like the way that Skinner noticed Scully's mouth. They could smell the old corruption on him, compared it with each other's imagined virtue.

Too late for human contact, too late for a lot of things.

* * *

Grisdale, WA

8:45 AM PST

The wreckage had been transported to a small commercial charter hangar just east of Grisdale. As they pulled up, Mulder noticed two obvious rental cars, most likely the FAA team, parked outside next to an impractical-looking red sports car. Sherry Tsang, wearing a blue FAA windbreaker, stormed out of the partially opened hangar doors as the agents stepped out of the car. She thrust a carbon copy of an official form under Mulder's chin.

"What the hell is this? Who gave you authority over this investigation?" Mulder recoiled slightly as he took the paper. Scully interposed herself slightly, standing perpendicular to Mulder's shoulder.

"Sonofa... Fuck!" Mulder swore. Scully caught the paper on its first downward swirl. It was an authorization for Air Force personnel to take custody of unspecified materials, presumably the wreckage of the space capsule. The authorizing official's signature blank said "Fox Mulder", not in the agent's careless scrawl, but in the same neat capitals they had seen earlier that morning. "Now we know where Krycek was." He paced five steps, stopping with his hands on his hips.

"Ms. Tsang, did you see any of this happening?" Scully glanced at Mulder as she asked the question.

"When I got here they were almost finished. They were wearing black uniforms and weren't exactly sociable." Tsang looked at the two agents, and nodded at the form Scully was holding. "Let me guess, that's not your signature."

"Good guess." Mulder returned to the small gathering, peering around at the small cluster of buildings.

"So these guys weren't military?" Tsang asked. "Is this legitimate?"

"Well, they were probably military, but not being legit and not getting away with it are two different things."

"Do you have any idea where they might have taken the wreckage?" Scully looked at two others, probably members of Tsang's team, coming out of the hangar doors.

"There are a lot of military installations around here. It didn't say anything on that." Tsang gestured at the half-crumpled form with Krycek's printing on it.

"What are you and your people doing?" Scully nodded towards the hangar.

"Well, we called Portland FSDO and they didn't know anything about this. I'd like to sit here until someone tells us to leave, but there isn't a hell of a lot of point. We've still got material but we may as well have it in Portland. They asked for all our notes and films, but well, you know how it is," she grinned thinly. "You kinda miss things when goons are harassing you."

"I'm gonna call Skinner," Mulder dug for his cell. "They screwed up the moment Alex Krycek forged my signature. Even if the rest of this is on the level we've got jurisdiction right there."

"Do you seriously think we're going to get anywhere that way?"

"Somebody wants us to get somewhere, Scully, remember? They called us."

"Mulder, Krycek called us. He's playing some kind of game with you."

"Last time I ran into Krycek, he gave me the impression he was working both sides of some division. Maybe this is part of it. He may be juggling conflicting orders here."

"Should I remind you that last time you ran into Krycek he beat you up and

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handcuffed you to your desk?" Scully's chin set hard as she stepped in close to him, her voice low and dark. Oh, and apparently he kissed you, too, she thought to herself, but I just don't want to go there.

"Yeah," Mulder replied, "and it's about time I got a little payback."

"Okay... I don't know about you two," Tsang began, breaking into something that she could see escalating, "but I know I have jurisdiction. If that's a Soviet craft, it's civil until the Russian Federation says it isn't and Boris Yeltsin hasn't called me yet. And if those goons weren't on the level, I want my investigation back." A cell phone beeped, and all three glanced at each other, Mulder shrugged that it wasn't his. Scully dug in her coat, walking out of their little triangle and identifying herself into the phone.

"Are you and your team based in Portland?" Mulder asked the younger woman.

"Officially. Most of us are in Seattle-Tacoma, though; better air connections. A lot of my people are contractors, and I can't justify keeping this together without something physical to investigate. I'd rather take what I've got right now back to Seattle where I can talk to more people off the record."

"Mulder?" Scully flipped the cover on her cell phone closed and walked back to them. "It looks like you went to the morgue, too."

"Body's gone?" Mulder studied the horizon for a second and sucked at his teeth, then turned to Tsang. "I'm gonna call DC and try to get support for Scully and I to work this thing. Let me know before you leave or get ordered out."

"Sure thing. Sorry I jumped on you this morning on the phone." The woman paused. "But. If we're gonna work this, we're gonna trade. You can have everything I get, on or off the record, on one condition."

"Okay..." Mulder glanced sideways at his partner when she responded for them.

"Krycek. Who's Krycek?"

"That's a pretty good question," Mulder began, his voice tight. "He's an operator, black-type operations. Probably CIA at some point. Things that the government's left

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hand really wants to keep the right hand from knowing." Scully looked at him, then back to the FAA inspector.

"There's no delicate way to put this. Alex Krycek's a killer."

"Right." The word came out with what for the young engineer was a positive drawl. Mulder stepped in closer to her.

"Be really careful what questions you ask. Keep your antennas up. The minute something feels weird, call us."

"Sounds like you guys have done this before."

"Yeah. Look, you might want to just..."

"Fuck that. I want my Vostok." Sherry Tsang handed him a business card and jogged towards the hangar. She stopped, turning around. "You don't know why this is so damn important either, do you."

Mulder laughed a little as he opened up his cell.

"Do we ever...?"

* * *

"Skinner."

"It's Mulder. Look, we're onto something out here. I've got Alex Krycek running around signing my name to federal documents."

"Sonofabitch." He leaned back in his chair, turning it away from the desk slightly.

"We want to stay out here and keep working this. Most of the physical evidence has disappeared on us, but Krycek is out here somewhere and knows where it all is."

"No, Mulder, I'm ordering you back to DC right now. Even if you hadn't contravened a direct order by going out there, I just had a military courier show up with a sheaf and a half of paperwork describing the NSA's position that this is none

of the Bureau's business. I don't know if this'll all hold up but I don't think they're going to wait until I make sure their t's are crossed." He looked at his empty desktop, but could hear Mulder swallowing the lie whole for the time being.

"NSA? It's the Air Force out here. What the hell is this?"

"We'll talk about it in my office, ten o'clock tomorrow. Just get back here." The line clicked dead, and Walter stared at the handset, letting it slip a bit in his grip.

* * *

The rain hammered on the car as they drove south. The morning sun had lasted all of four hours before rain rolled in from the northwest. She didn't speak at first, not for a long while.

"Mulder."

"Yes?" His tone sounded slightly calculated. He'd been planning just how to respond as he glanced over at her, watching her think, for the past forty minutes.

"We're stuck with each other, you know that?" Her strange choice of words struck him. A dozen retorts came to mind, but he chose nothing quickly. She stared out the passenger window, away from him, carefully gathering herself as he began his apology.

"I'm sorry, Scully. I'd pro..." He almost flinched as she turned as rapidly and forcefully as someone wearing a seatbelt could.

"First fucking case, Mulder. First time we go up against these people when they can use us against each other and you have already cut me out once." Mulder's face quickly went through three different expressions before he responded.

"They've been able to use us against each other for years. You can't un-admit that."

"That's not the point." She faced forward again, glaring down the highway.

"You brought it up," he grunted.

"So what you're saying is that nothing's changed except we're ripping the taxpayer off for hotel rooms?" The words snapped, things she immediately wished she hadn't said.

"No! You know that's... I said it already. I wasn't... I didn't want to beli... be sure." His jaw worked furiously, molars grinding. Scully could tell he was considering pulling over. "The last time we went up against this you almost died, Scully. I was walking around on a fucking bridge full of corpses looking for redheads." His face was suddenly flushed, and his voice caught. "Burned people, Scully. I was thinking, what if her hair is gone? How am I gonna find her if her hair is gone?"

"Then we need to make these decisions together!" she shot back, her voice raised even higher than his.

She realized after the fact that it made no sense as a response, which suited the pattern. They didn't fight, she thought, not as a couple. Hadn't fought once, hadn't found anything to fight about. Random bits of code sometimes flew out when voices raised or tempers flared, things pressed diamond-hard in deep furnaces but since gone cold, simply ejected to make room. This didn't qualify as a fight-- the Scullys, six willful people in a series of small houses, knew fighting. It built character. No one got to age fourteen in a Scully household without learning to scream "I hate you," to take a real cuff across the ear for the boys or a threatened one for the girls, and knowing all the ways to slam a door. By fifteen, Dana, the smart one, had learned a different way. Don't scream, just glare, don't ever flinch no matter how close the arm comes to moving, and shut the door hard, precise. You can cry in your room, you can scream in your pillow. Just don't let them know you slammed the door.

For all his considerable potential for real violence, Mulder wouldn't last ten seconds in a Scully fight. Real fights are contests of will alone. Mulder mistakes arguing for fighting.

He probably considers this a fight, she thought.

"I can't not forgive you. S'too much at stake." Scully reached out suddenly, her hand jutting out almost awkwardly. He pulled one hand off the wheel and met her, touching in midair.

* * *

There is a tangle of sheets in the middle of the bed, no quilts, no comforter. His legs are long and the white curls in and out of them, and his body is lean, softening slightly in late thirties. He surrounds her without touching her, her knees drawn up under sheets, a small body in a small space enclosed by his concern. She is trying to shame tears back into her eyes, as she fears another betrayal from herself. The scent is of heated city and woman-dwelling and interrupted sex, sweat without liquid. Each tear she holds in is a tiny shake in her shoulders, a tightening in thighs she tried to open to his tenderness.

I'm sorry Mulder, I'm sorry I'm sorry...

Sssshhhh... Shhhhh... he touches her now, light on her temple, behind her ear, shoulder blades. It's okay Scully it's okay baby it's okay...

It's not you Mulder it's not it's not anything I just don't know just.. her fist beats slowly on her knee, and she concentrates on the point of impact.

I know I know it's okay baby it's okay. His hand covers her fist and holds it there, stopping the motion, enveloping her fist in his fingers, slowly drawing the tension out of it. She swallows, she gulps, and air comes into her lungs in ragged, damp sighs, the hurt unknotting and spreading out.

"I don't know what they, what they ...did to me... there, where I was, and I, I don't remember..."

She is looking up now, up at him. He knows the question is will he try to understand, and she knows the answer.

"And I don't want to know, or remember... but..." and she is rocking a little again, and her fist is hardening and wants to move sssshhhh Scully it's okay it's okay "...there's something there Mulder, sometimes, sometimes my body remembers, my body remembers..."

That is something, the shaping of it into words, and she lets him put his arms around her shoulders and draw her close.

* * *

FBI Headquarters
Washington, DC
Wednesday, May 27 1998
10:00 AM

"Good morning, sir." Well, that sounded like I was sucking up, Scully thought. Mulder had a look of practiced indifference, sleepy-eyed and casual.

"Sit down." Skinner didn't stand up behind his desk, nor did he look up. He joined his hands on the desk in front of him. "I haven't requested a report from you on why you left DC against my orders on Monday morning." He finally looked up at them, glancing at Scully and then piercing Mulder.

"I've been informed rather clearly by Air Force intelligence that the matter which you chose to investigate on your own is no interest of the Bureau, and that it's a matter of national security. I had two full colonels in here yesterday to tell me that. That's why I don't want your report." He stood up and looked out the window, his broad back to the agents. The humidity was rising again, and the smell of sweating diesel and civilization was gathering its dank shroud outside.

"Sir, we received a tip-off from a reliable source..." Scully began, drawing a glance from Mulder.

"So? There are FBI agents in Seattle."

"I was given the impression, sir, that time was of the essence." Mulder snapped.

"What's of the essence, Agent Mulder, is that you and Agent Scully have become a little too used to having unlimited freedom of action. The X-Files division, like any other office in this organization, has to consider the best way to make use of its resources. Those resources, incidentally, include your lives."

"Sir, especially now, this is a valid investigation. We've got official complicity in a coverup, Agent Scully's autopsy results, and our notes from the crash site."

"Stop jerking me around, Mulder. Which is it? Your anonymous tip? Or what you

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found when you got there? If you add those up it sounds like a set-up, a set-up whoever is behind it knows you couldn't resist. Get out and let it go. That is an order. You're dismissed. Agent Scully, I need a moment of your time, please."

"Sir, if this discussion relates in any way to Agent Mulder, I would prefer that he were present for it."

Oh, for fuck's sakes, Walter thought. I can get attitude in stereo now.

"Very well, Agent Scully. I'll be frank. I have come to expect a higher degree of responsibility and judgment from you than your recent actions would suggest."

"Are you implying that I am responsible for Agent Mulder, sir?"

"You have considerable concern for his well-being, Agent Scully?"

"Thank you, sir. Will that be all?"

"You're dismissed."

* * *

X-Files Division Office
3:20 PM

Mulder started slightly when Lieutenant Uhura answered the phone.

"Hailing frequencies open, Captain." BEEP.

"Uhhhh... This message is for Sherry Tsang, this is Fox Mulder in Washington, please call me at 555-1013... uhhh, if you get this."

Okay, after that, I'm putting 'get your filthy hands off my desert' back on my machine, Mulder thought as he looked at the photos from Krycek's gift spread out in front of him. The zip disk had proven largely impenetrable, with copies of the documents for which they already had print copies and several large data files he'd handed over to the Gunmen for their entertainment. He'd just returned from their lair. Langly had looked at him pityingly, he remembered.

At first.

* * *

"Well, these five are just tiff files, Mulder," Langly announced.

"What's that?"

"A less efficient way of storing porn." Byers looked up from a magazine.

"Anything good?"

"Ahhh, but with no degradation when you alter the... oh my sweet lord, what the fuck is that?" Frohike took over the mouse from Langly, who had blanched visibly and pulled his chair back from the terminal.

"Jesus H. Christ on a crutch." The longhaired man unfolded himself from the chair, taking his cola with him.

"I'm guessing this is Agent Scully's department?" Frohike rifled quickly through the image files, checking the printer for paper. "You want hard copies?"

"Uh, yeah, yeah, of course." Mulder paced in a small circle, then quickly shoved the printouts Frohike handed him into the folder he'd brought.

"Want us to take a look at those other files? I don't know if they're encrypted or what, but they're definitely unfamiliar." All three of them regarded Mulder intently. Frohike had closed the image viewer, but Langly was still glancing at the monitor as if it had been cursed.

"Yeah, that'd be, uhhh, that'd be great. I better get this stuff to Scully." Mulder looked down at the folder. "Yeah." He headed out the door, which clunked shut behind him.

"Well, that was some fucked-up shit," Langly started, picking up between two fingers the zip disk Mulder had left. Frohike swiped it out of his hands and jammed it into a drive.

"You ladies want to dwell on your upset tummies," Frohike chided, "or you want to stick it to the man?"

* * *

Mulder arranged the photo prints on his desk again just as the door opened. Her eyes were downcast, face serious, thoughtful.

"Hey," he said quietly.

"Hey," she responded, looking up. A faint smile touched her lips, and she seemed to relax slightly.

"So where have you been?"

"Lab. I got those samples analyzed... to a point." She lowered herself into her swivel chair, pulling one shoe off and rubbing at her heel. She glanced around the room, then looked at him pointedly. He shrugged. If we're bugged, we're bugged. Scully wheeled the chair over to the other side of the desk, opposite him.

"It's human tissue, of a sort. It's more appropriate to say that it could be human tissue. It's a sort of undifferentiated cellular material that's not really like and not really unlike any other human tissue or organ. It's nothing anyone had ever seen before, but McEvoy thought it looked a little like something she'd read about, experimental artificial tissues grown for grafting purposes." She nodded at the new printouts on his desk. "What did you get?"

"You're going to love this." He pushed them, delicately, like a child avoiding the pictures of spiders in the encyclopedia. Scully scooped up the loose sheaf of prints.

"Oh, my God." A table, metal, morgue, familiar. Black and white print; gross pathology slide. On the table, perhaps five and a half feet long, oblong, slightly wider in the middle, silvery like scar tissue and wrinkled like a knuckle.

"No, ah... no visible limbs?" she heard herself saying, starting the examination as Mulder watched her face. "Mulder, is this from the earlier crash, the files that Krycek..."

"Yeah." The body (body?) widened slightly three-quarters of the way up, there a suggestion of shoulder and perhaps collarbone (burning, is it some kind of burning but there's no cauterization) and then, yes, the neck was recognizable and the frame cut it off there. She rifled to the next print and stifled some sort of exclamation. The neck reached up, slightly longer than possible, and widened into an ovoid shape with the same texture.

The face on it was a woman's, quite clear and even normal allowing for the lack of chin, ears or hairline. A strong nose, not unlike Scully's but perhaps more like Mulder's. Wide lips, low cheekbones. A simple, even slightly pretty woman's face. Looking again, pressing down on the rising coil of unease in her stomach, Scully noted that the eyes looked too simple, as if the eyelids were merely folds, and the nostrils were just depressions in the proud mount of the nose. The eyes were blank and dark. She looked at the rest of the prints. A closeup of an incision, perhaps a half-inch deep, across the middle of the main mass.

"No tissue differentiation."

The scalpel had been taken through the eye, showing a small convex lens of transparent, tinted material before more of the same stuff as the rest of it. The final frame had the body sliced neatly in half lengthwise, photographed from the cut side. Nothing inside, solid, a perceptible darkening of the colour of the material in the center. The cut neatly followed the profile of nose and forehead. She dropped the prints between her knees, lowering her head for a moment, then replaced them on Mulder's desk.

"It's... similar, obviously. Was there any documentation or autopsy report?"

"Not unless it's in one of the files the guys are still working on." They both jumped in their seats as the phone rang.

"Hello! Mulder..." he began. Scully saw him mouth 'Sherry Tsang' at her and nodded.

"Yeah, I have something you might be interested in. Do you have a fax at home? Great... well, I'll send it all along and you can take a look. Five, ten minutes. I'll talk to you later."

"Seems you have a kindred spirit," Scully noted as her partner set the phone down and began gathering papers. She glanced one more time at the five prints. "You think we can trust her?"

"With what? Someone's dumping this stuff in our laps, Scully. There's something we're supposed to find. Besides, I'm only sending her the technical stuff from this batch of wreckage." Scully watched him standing, moving towards the fax machine. She stood, and a signal passed between them. He stopped, and she reached out. They held onto each other, Scully gripping the edge of his palm, working her fingers slowly.

"How you doing?" he asked quietly.

"No, no, I'm fine," she said distractedly. The rubbing of her fingers slowed, and she let go of his hand. Scully glanced towards the doorway, and Mulder set the papers down beside the fax.

They walked down the hallway until Mulder stopped, leaning back against a maintenance room door.

"Mulder, how are we going to cover that we're still working on this?"

"Why bother? Skinner hasn't given us any room to work on real X-Files in weeks. You saw those pictures. We're onto something here."

"For once I'm not going to argue with you." Scully crossed her arms in front of her as the memory of the ghastly lump of tissue on the anonymous autopsy table pushed up from the base of her skull. "What are you doing this evening?" Mulder chuckled and didn't respond verbally, nodding back towards the office. "Well, I'm going to the gym first, now that my jet lag's gone."

"Mmmm. Sweaty Scully. Need a towel boy?" He leaned close to her and whispered. She smiled at him and turned her lovely face down the hall as Mulder felt her tugging at a button low on his shirt. She turned back to him, whispering.

"You're a little overqualified for towel boy." Mulder's hand was on the swell of her hip, in the empty hallway. He smiled too, half his age.

"Can I be Towel Maaaaan?" He reluctantly dropped his hand. "I better go fax Tsang. I'll call you as soon as the guys get back to me."

"I'll be home later," she said.

He'd heard it, was waiting for something from her, hadn't just headed back to the office to start faxing.

I could mean a couple of things, she thought. Call, come by. The weeknights they spent together tended to be at her place, weekends more frequently at his. They didn't plan in advance. It seemed to work out anyway, and she felt strange, unused muscles stretching (besides the obvious ones). She knew she had a new lazy, welcoming smile to let him know that it was okay that he'd showed up at midnight, as long as he left up to her whether anything besides sleeping was going to happen.

* * *

The King Edward's Arms
Washington, DC
5:50 PM

Jeffrey Spender left his jacket in the car and loosened his tie. He felt himself melt into the bar's afternoon crowd, indistinguishable from eighty other just-past-young professionals with accounts on the brain and Tracey from Marketing in their sights. Mulder was the exception, he thought. Dressing too sharp was a warning sign of individualism and ambition. Agents who dressed like Mulder usually lasted five or six years, then paid out and became 'consultants' where the money was better and the politics irrelevant.

His date was early, as he had been for every other meeting. It was difficult for one man to hold a booth to himself during happy hour in the Eddy, but Spender figured that the smooth, dully shining plastic of the man's left arm had something to do with it. He looked tired this time, his hair still damp as if he had just showered, dark circles under his eyes. Spender slid into the booth and glanced at the other as the waitress closed in on them. The one-handed man asked her what was on tap, and they both ordered beer. The girl looked at the man's handsome face with more than a usual professional interest, and then withdrew perceptibly as he tapped his plastic hand against the tabletop.

"Jeffrey."

"Wilkins."

"How are we doing?"

"I'm doing fine," Spender said pointedly. "But if this is expanding into the Assistant Director's office as well I'm going to need some help."

"Jeffrey, Skinner's got connections upstairs. You're doing this because OPR can trust you, you're outside, you're clean. If we bring in anyone else he might figure it out even if Mulder and Scully don't."

Spender leaned forward towards Wilkins, his elbow a few inches from Wilkins' plastic hand.

"Then I need my ass covered. I need something on paper saying that the Office of Professional Review, on a request from the National Security Agency, asked Agent Jeffrey Spender to collect taps and evidence on the X-Files division and AD Skinner regarding..." The other man's eyes flared, and he cut Spender off.

"For fuck's sakes, Jeffrey, keep your voice down. I'll get you your fucking paper. Now drink your beer." He set an example, plastic fingers clicking on the glass. Spender wondered how long it had taken him to learn to pick up a drink with that hand.

"Mulder faxed some of the documents to an FAA office in Portland. The content matched what you were describing."

"Well, that's fucking typical Fox Mulder," Wilkins observed. "Steal classified material and then advertise you have it." Spender wondered just how well this cold, one-armed man knew Mulder. He was younger than Spooky, probably by five years, and looked ex-military-- which might explain the hand. Wilkins suddenly drained his beer in a few long gulps.

"I'm going to have to get going. I'll be in touch." He stood, picking up a suit jacket off the bench beside him.

Spender nodded.

"And in the meantime?"

"Just keep doing what you're doing, Jeffrey, you're good at it. Watch your mail."

* * *

Alex Krycek looked both ways before crossing the street outside the bar. Some people worry about traffic, he thought, and some people worry about drive-bys. Spender just barely crossed the line into smart, Krycek reflected. Smart enough to know he was the easiest fall guy but too stupid to consider the benefits of coloring outside the lines. All you have to do is draw him a new set of lines.

Krycek rubbed at his eyes. The ginseng had stopped working last week, and the caffeine pills were just keeping him awake on the planes from DC to Seattle. Another week of transcontinental Mulder-busting and I'm going to be doing speed, he thought. Not that he was completely against speed, but there was a time and a place. He pulled a black leather glove onto his cripple-hand as he swung into the driver's seat of a company car and thumbed numbers into his cell with the other. The other end rang five times.

"Yes?" The precise, foreign voice. A direct line, Krycek thought, class all the way.

"It's me. Mulder's showing off the gift I gave him."

"You know him. Find a way to keep him interested."

"I'm on my way back west tonight."

He clicked off the phone and put the car in gear, disappearing into the fluid rush of traffic.

* * *

s o k o l

ii

d u a l i s t i c c o s m o l o g y

Fox Mulder's Apartment
Alexandria, VA
6:48 PM

Right now, Scully's working out, he thought, leaning back on the leather couch. I've got secret Air Force data files, freak autopsies, antique space capsules falling from the sky and I'm thinking of Scully's sweat.

In the time of his solitude Fox Mulder had remembered the basics, with the help of the occasional study aid. Breasts, thighs, soft dewed folds, mouth. But he realized quickly that he had forgotten so many important things, and set himself to relearning tastes and textures. Underarm, the back of her knee, the inside of her forearm, the crease where the swell of her ass joined her thigh. He'd forgotten what it felt like to pull on a nipple, the flesh of breast rising slightly, and how a woman's juices could be sticky and slippery at the same time. She had been closer to a fantasy than he imagined she would be, her breasts larger and softer, nipples darker, belly firmer and better defined. Her arousal could range from playful to desperate. They would take turns between her crawling over him as though he were her playground, and her taking charge of her smaller figure, turning her around and over in his arms to bring different parts of her to his mouth or hands or cock.

Scully's sweat was sharp and slightly bitter, salty, without the underlying round foulness of his own.

Mulder realised he was hard, hard with the idea that she could be in his bed soon or he in hers, with the idea of her sleek body cupped and pressed by damp lycra as she stretched, lifted, moved. Maybe she was in the shower. Closing her eyes, he thought, the water beating against her forehead as her fingers swept her hair back, then rested briefly against the upper swells of her breasts. Scully's soapy hands crossed up her arms, to her shoulders, then drew crossing sudsy paths over her nipples, down to her hips. Her eyes suddenly slightly lidded, she glances slowly around the shower room. She is alone. The heavy, damp air tastes like soap and faint mildew, and the water slaps loosely on the tiles. Scully's hand slips down between her legs, one long caress starting at the narrow patch of dark hair and moving lower. She stops there, rubbing in a circular motion, her two long fingertips in a gently circular motion over her slick opening, the heel of her hand pressuring her clitoris.

ring

ring

curled up in your arms apologizing, Jesus Mulder that would have been your postorgasmic guilt surge today

"Huuuhhh? Mulder..."

"Whoa, Mulder. I hope I didn't interrupt any X-Files division extracurricular activities."

"What is it, Frohike?"

"We've got it. When can you get here?"

"On my way."

* * *

Offices of "The Lone Gunman"

7:13 PM

"Well, it took a little doing, but we eventually got the sucker cracked..." Frohike led Mulder around several crates with UPS labels that were just inside the door. New toys, Mulder assumed.

"It was encrypted?"

"We just didn't know what it was," Frohike said. "You got it going there?" Langly held up one pausing finger as he tapped away at a keyboard.

"So what is it?"

"A whole bag of DoD goodies," Frohike responded. "One's a radar trace from a Navy ship, we think, in one of the weapons ranges off the Pacific Coast. Another radar trace from I don't know where, but it's orbital stuff, not aerial, so that would narrow it down to a few installations. And what seem like voice and telemetry transmissions. I'm guessing this has to do with those pictures you sent Langly, right?"

"Maybe."

"Too easy." Langly called out in mid-roll between two terminals.

"We can't grep the telemetry except that it's really crude stuff by modern standards," Frohike continued. "Byers said he'd give it another go, but the voice transmission.. well... you got it, Langly?"

"Here we go."

The woman's voice was distant and with a watery sort of distortion over swelling washes of static and a vague, low rumble. Too distorted? Mulder first thought, then no, just not English. Short, repetitive statements. Reporting. Interspersed with something longer, slightly more emotive. Observations, maybe.

"It's Russian?" Mulder asked. Byers nodded.

The voice seemed to slide further underwater, with a slightly greater stressor to it. Mulder realized he could hear a professional facade cracking, higher pitched, faster.

s o k o l

After slightly more than two minutes, the voice rippled and buzzed out of existence.

"It's going to take a few hours at least for us to track down somebody to translate this reliably," Byers said, breaking an uncomfortable silence.

"Mostly, I can tell she is giving readings of some sort, numbers, repeated." He rocked once on his heels. "I also think she says, 'It's hot', and 'I see a flame.'" Mulder's mind drifted over the charred wreckage in the dense, wet brush.

"Reentry."

"Probably." Byers nodded. "Because of the ionization, it would be unusual but not impossible to maintain radio contact up to this point."

"When did you learn Russian, Byers?"

"I took it in college when I wanted to go into the CIA." Byers smiled slightly. "I forgot most of it, but this is pretty simple stuff."

"Narc." Langly tapped up a series of aerial navigation maps on parallel screens.

"The radar traces are definitely of an object entering the atmosphere from orbit after a course correction-- actually, two course corrections." Byers spun the chair around and sat with knees spread, leaning forward. "I thought this was kind of strange, though, because once a spacecraft begins reentry you don't normally change the trajectory."

"It's kind of like riding a toboggan. Try to turn and ...wipeout." Frohike added from his vantage point by their tangle of telephonic equipment. Mulder nodded back at him.

"Was anyone transmitting back to the, uh, craft?"

"It's hard to tell." Byers picked up a sheaf of printouts. "I'm not really familiar with these kind of telemetric transmissions, especially not what this looks like." He glanced at Mulder, gesturing with the ream of paper. "We know someone who might be able to make better sense of it for you, though."

s o k o l

"Twelver?" Frohike stepped forward with his arms crossed across his chest.

"Is it important? Twelver's a valuable resource." Langly moved to a chair nearer Mulder, straddling it backwards, completing an informal circle.

"Who's Twelver?" Mulder asked, looking around the circle "Yeah, it might be important."

"He's a spook." Frohike said. "Signals intelligence, like NSA, but not one of ours. Foreign. Does a little hobby work for us sometimes."

"Can we trust him?" Mulder looked from Frohike to Langly. Stupid question. "How do I get in contact with him?"

"You don't," Langly replied. "Leave it to us, we got all the stuff anyway."

"How long's it going to take?"

"This is important, right?" Frohike asked Mulder with a serious tone.

"I think so."

"How long to get those files uploaded?" the older Gunman asked Langly.

"Sometime tonight, then I'll leave Twelver a flag for the download."

"Maybe three, four days?"

* * *

"Scully, it's me." He tucked the phone up between head and shoulder to pull out of his parking space. "The boys got a few more things for us."

"I've got something for us too, Mulder," she replied.

"What's that?"

"I found her." He heard the shadow of distraction in her voice that meant she was

looking at something else. Computer, maybe, the soft glow lighting the planes of her face. She would have the look of unfocused concern that meant... shit, Mulder, he told himself, get a grip on it.

"I'm on my way over."

* * *

Anacostia, DC

9:34 PM

Spender looked both ways before crossing the street, sprinting across to the graffiti-scarred pay phone. The reason people tap your phone, Mulder, is that you use your own goddamn phone.

"Yes?" the voice answered.

"It's me. Mulder's gotten hold of what look like some DoD documents that the OPR guy found very interesting."

He heard the pause of a cigarette puff.

"That's Wilkins? The cripple?" The older man's disapproval of Spender's contact had been clear for some weeks.

"Yeah, that's him. I have copies if you're interested."

"That won't be necessary-- I'm familiar with the matter already." The smoker chuckled on the end of the line. "Agent Mulder never gets bored with digging his own grave, especially if someone offers to take the shovel away. Has he made any progress on your mother's case?"

"Not so I've noticed." The graffiti inside the phone booth was a dense code of warring tags. If there had been any original meaning besides an endless stream of 'me!', it was long lost.

"I'm still looking into that, but I haven't got very much to offer besides what I already misguidedly gave Agent Mulder." The smoker paused. "Has he shared Dr. Werber's files from Agent Scully's hypnosis?"

"No, he hasn't."

"That's... unfortunate. I'll see if there's any leverage I might be able to apply from my end."

"I appreciate it."

"Thank you, Jeffrey."

Spender hung up the phone, looked both ways, and jogged back to his car.

* * *

Mulder leaned over her shoulder, looking at the monitor of the Mac in her bedroom, noticing her hair was still damp from a post-workout shower.

"Galina Kovalyova," Scully announced as the images pulled up onto the screen. "These pages are about the Soviet space program. This is the first class of female cosmonauts."

"But only one of them went into space, right? Tereshkova?"

"That's the story. But look here, this picture is of the entire class in November 1962. 'Not shown: Galina Kovalyova.'" She clicked on the link, and a small biographical page appeared.

"Says she was killed in a training flight, February 1963..." Then the small black-and-white photo finished loading. Dark hair, cropped short, unfamiliar on a face that needed longer hair to soften low, hard cheekbones and a prominent nose. Without a doubt, it was the face from the hideous autopsy photos. Mulder placed his hand on Scully's shoulder.

"That's it. That's her."

"I think it's entirely possible that she may have been killed in an earlier accident that the Soviets didn't want to admit."

"Entirely possible, Scully?"

"Mulder, this is the easiest part to explain in all this. The Soviets wanted to have the first woman in space, but they especially didn't want her to be the first casualty. So they just developed this story around her, placing her in this class of female cosmonauts later."

"So why'd she come down twice?"

Scully leaned back slightly in her chair. She spoke carefully.

"We don't know that the crash that we were called to was her. It couldn't have been. The first crash couldn't have been her either, it was something that partially looked like her. It wasn't any kind of burn damage, or radiation damage, or...?" She trailed off.

"Then why is this her?" Mulder said after a time.

"I don't know. Just a feeling."

"A feeling? I'm impressed. Are we going to have to chalk this one up to 'Satan' too?" She snorted. It was an occasional joke, where they considered handing some utterly convoluted and indecipherable investigation back to Skinner marked 'Satan,' written in red Sharpie, with no explanation.

"Careful, Mulder, speaking of the devil again." She turned towards him in her chair. "What did the Gunmen have for us?"

* * *

She had always disliked her dreams, even before she had been sown with the seeds of nightmares. Mulder asked her about her dreams, and she was embarrassed. Silly, trite things they seemed, the unwindings of a busy mind preoccupied with minutiae. Taking the school bus with her brothers, ending up at FBI Headquarters. Cars, airplanes that didn't work, lost hallway passes, crowds of people at meaningless events shifting faces between old classmates and siblings. Mulder sometimes, other situations dissolving into arguing with Mulder, having sex with Mulder, her fifteen-year-old self playing tennis with Mulder and being mad because he was better than

at it than her. She wanted to have dreams that she would be able to dismiss despite their obvious symbolic richness; she wanted to dream of white horses, of undersea, of cryptically arranged gardens.

But this night she dreamed of flight. Green-brown-black fields checkerboarded below, the sky blue and unbounded except by the distant line of horizon. The wind roared joyfully in her ears, tugged at her limbs.

* * *

Olympia National Forest
Thursday, May 28, 1998
12:45 PM PST

The Englishman loves this kind of shit, Krycek thought. Meeting under a tent. Battle of Britain, Lawrence of Arabia. That nasty business in the Sudan with 'Chinese' Gordon, you know old boy?

"I have no doubt that you are already aware why this meeting has been called in this place," the Englishman began. Krycek looked around from his seat behind the dark man, at the impromptu parking lot full of Land Rovers and Cherokees. Limos don't cut it up here. "We have been contacted. The Colonists want a meeting." Ten, eleven figures around two long tables pressed end to end. Krycek had appropriated the only extra chair, and other aides and assistants stood uncomfortably around the meeting, insulating it from the purposeful black-uniformed figures running between trailers and equipment. The sun was currently winning its daily battle against the Pacific cloud cover, but the breeze through the tent was still damp and boreal.

"What kind of meeting?" The fat man. They're no better friends than they ever have been, Krycek thought.

"They want a remote viewer. Information must be transferred."

"Does it regard this business?"

"We can assume so."

"Then this has become serious. The involvement of other parties was a mistake." The

well-fed face turned towards the lean, dark visage of Krycek's employer, who lounged casually in his folding chair.

"It is I who involved you, my friend," the Indian replied, with a tinge of gentle humor. "That has been the problem of your group since the beginning. Your arrogance already cost you the cooperation of the Russians. And now?" He held up his hands in a gesture of dismissal, eyes glittering over the wire rims of his glasses.

"Colonel, how long will it take to undertake this?" the Englishman asked a black-uniformed man standing at ease at one corner of the awning.

"At Fort Meade, sir? Two or three hours, once coordinates are established. If that's how it works. I'm not certain, sir," he finished lamely, glancing at several technicians by one of the radar emplacements.

"I believe they are already waiting, gentlemen. Those of you who wish to accompany may do so." Heads nodded, aides scrambled out from under the canvas, cell-phones emerging. The dark man leaned back casually.

"Mr. Krycek, you have a package to deliver?" he said quietly. Krycek rose by way of response.

As the young man left the tent towards the parked vehicles, the smoker stepped out from where he had placed himself at the outskirts of the gathering. He gestured to a small group of men leaning against a Cherokee.

* * *

The uniform is not his, it has been some time since he wore a uniform that anyone would recognize. Like most uniforms, it grants one thing while restraining many others, and it is this one thing that the man wearing the uniform needs. What he needs is a nod from the guard on the main floor of the apartment complex.

"Yup, sixth floor. Sign in, please."

He took the stairs. There hadn't been a chance to check if there were cameras in the elevator or not, and where. They had radios, or cells, or something, because the two already upstairs managed to know he was coming. He'd heard the footsteps behind

him, was figuring on getting the guy between four and five when he heard a door open several flights up.

"How you boys doing?" The suits didn't answer the uniform, which would not be unusual. He looked over his shoulder.

"The package, Mr. Krycek."

"Sorry. It absolutely, positively has to get there."

Krycek threw himself backwards, slamming an elbow into the chest of the man below him on the stairs. The suit wheezed hard and high as something crunched in his chest. Alex let himself fall down around onto the next flight as the two suits from upstairs clattered down towards him. The stairwell was too narrow for them to double-team him, Krycek thought. He lunged up, supporting himself on the banister, kicking one leg straight out into a knee that buckled noisily. Broken-knee fell down, still clutching at him, and it was into the arms of the last one. There was a burst of light at the edge of Krycek's field of vision as the man swung sideways, striking him across the temple. Krycek shoved the man's arm further along the arc of the blow and pushed hard. The suit fell down three stairs, halting on one knee facing away from Krycek and below him. Alex launched himself down the stairs as if running, planting one foot between the man's shoulder blades and stamping hard on him as he literally ran the suit over. There was a faint wet crunch as his torso was crushed against the edges of the stairs by Alex's falling weight. The suit moaned loudly, one hand fluttering weakly as Krycek mounted the stairs towards Sherry Tsang's apartment.

* * *

It struck the security guard at the desk as slightly odd that the UPS courier he'd buzzed in five minutes before was leaving with the same package under his arm. And, had he not been suddenly occupied by the stairwell door clanging open and a broken, bloodied man in a suit falling to the floor of the lobby, he would have noticed the courier dropping his package in the mailbox outside the building.

* * *

Fort Meade, Maryland
4:58PM EST

The captain noticed the man's hands shaking slightly as he lit a cigarette. He wished he was cleared to smoke in here, he wished he smoked, he wished he had some gum to chew or something to put his eyes out with. Gimme an order, sir, please. Anything. I'll drop and give you infinity. I'll run to Huntsville. I'll go to Ops-1 and do a My Lai in the cafeteria. Just don't make me stand in here anymore. The smoker finally released a long rush of smoke, steadied, but there was still a slight crack in his voice.

"Captain?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Prepare tapes of the session for the M12 list and distribute." The smoker looked at him directly, a dark and empty distance behind his eyes. "Captain?"

"Sir?"

"Do you have a family, Captain?"

"Uhhh... no sir. Not myself. I have a sister, in Cincinnati, and she has two kids, sir." The smoker looked past the captain, concentrating on something else. The soldier stood for a few moments, nervous.

"Yes, you're dismissed, Captain."

* * *

X-Files Division Office
Friday, May 29 1998
9:22AM EST

Mulder had gone to the Library of Congress, chasing Russian spaceships. She knew there was no point in going with him. Mulder's evolution into Homo libraris whenever he was in the vicinity of more than thirty books wasn't something she wanted to interfere in. Surrounded by disconnected information, Mulder's mind

would turn in on itself into an analytical frenzy, holding everything up to everything else.

For all her years of playing the spoiler, the inactivity was grating-- not that she missed being knee-deep in mud and chicken guts somewhere, or honestly wanted to find some new Luther Boggs-- but it made her feel as if she was in her grandfather's boots at Anzio, waiting to hit the beach, for the shells to start flying and the deadly dice rolling. It didn't seem to bother Mulder as much, since the X-Files appeared to just be one segment of a one-man Department of Parapsychological Studies.

Like any office, there was a steady flow of paper that needed to be maintained whether anything was being produced or not. The pattern that had developed was that they would send a request to Skinner's office to proceed on an existing case or lead, which would be denied, or take long enough to be approved that the trail would go cold. Travel was apparently out. A memo from Skinner's office, which he hadn't had the stomach to fully explain to Mulder's face, was that the X-Files division was currently restricted due to budgetary concerns. Until a new allocation was approved, the memo read, there would be no X-Files involvement in cases where it was not requested by other local or federal law enforcement.

And, considering no one outside of the Weekly Weird News knows we're here, Dana thought, that put a bit of a damper on things. She and Mulder had tried to play along and submitted what they thought was a very modest and well-considered budget proposal. It should have been a mind-wracking, soul-crushing procedure, but she remembered three nights in her apartment, their less-than-meticulous records of the past five years in boxes and piles, thrusting papers at each other, tapping on her laptop, calling Byers for patient explanations of how to make the spreadsheet work. Her: detailed, procedural, a strong finisher. Him: scattered at first, having already figured out enough of the big picture to satisfy himself and now pushing at odd angles. It was a different kind of normal, she thought. Like doing our taxes, she'd imagined, trying to remember how my friend had told us we could claim part of the new car and we'd be up too late before we went upstairs to bed. Only there's no upstairs, she remembered, and we still can't show up for work together every day...

Prior to reconfiguring themselves as an actual couple, Dana had tried to dissuade herself from such thoughts by imagining them having one of their knockdown arguments over paint chips, or paying bills. The fact was, however, that the events of

the past five years lent significant perspective to haggling over line-items in a spreadsheet.

She opened the CD tray of her laptop, sliding one of the Gunmen's CDROMs inside. It struck her as faintly ridiculous that she kept doing this. After all, she didn't know a word of Russian, didn't bother to follow along with Byers' transcription. She just wanted to hear the voice again, or needed to, as if something was wriggling and itching just under the surface of consciousness.

It was a Mulder thing to do, she realized. Mulder does this to try to put himself in the other's place, to see through other eyes. She listened again, trying to forget that she didn't understand, listening for the things she might.

The buzzy, clicky transmission sounds again in the small cluttered office. Even from the beginning, Dana recognizes the tension in the woman's voice. Something's wrong and she knows it, there's too many things happening at once. Not afraid, not yet, just trying to stay on top of it all. Dana's eyes close, still trying to forget that the foreign syllables make no actual sense. There, something new, something specific, dangerous, she knows that feeling. The woman responds by stiffening herself, doing something appropriate, following the procedure. It smells wrong. For days it's been just the air, freezing cold but thick and foul, but now there is something else, a hot chemical smell. Hot, that's it, that's what the tingling feeling is, it's been days since there was anything but dead cold and the nerves are coming alive with pain...

It took her two and a half rings to pick up the phone.

"Scully," she answered, swallowing to counter the hoarseness she heard.

"Agent Scully? I don't know if you remember me, my name's David Tickle. I'm from the Renton, Virginia Sheriff's Department?" Renton, Renton, chasing werewolves, early 1997. One previously undiagnosed case of paranoid schizophrenia, a poorly buried settler circa 1750. Three days during a very bad year.

"Yes, Officer Tickle, of course. What can I do for you?" She remembered Tickle as a smart one, well-read and sensible, who probably could have done better than a bedroom-town sheriff's department if not for what looked like an early and accidental marriage.

"Got an ugly, ugly one here. I was wondering if you and Agent Mulder might have a few hours." Ugly ones, Scully thought. Ugly ones are always children, or young, young women, usually sex. Sex is ugly, violence goes without saying.

"What's going on?"

"Nanny, twenty-two years old, French girl on a work exchange, kidnaps the kid she's taking care of, runs to a motel and then tries to OD herself on sleeping pills. The kid had some too but it looks possible that he might have taken them himself. He's seven, who knows. Girl claims the parents are involved in some kind of ritual abuse and she had to save the boy. She's got a bit of a history, currently being treated for depression, but nothing really off the wall like this. I've interviewed the kid, sort of, and there's definitely something going on."

"What do you mean?" Scully pulled a pad of paper close to her even though she almost never made notes.

"His delusions, or whatever, are a lot more sophisticated than the girl's and they don't match. He didn't get it from her. She's talking about ritual Satanic abuse and he's talking about... well, I don't know what he's talking about. Girl doesn't have any history with this, no interest in the occult, no Marilyn Manson records, nothing."

"What about the boy's parents?" Scully asked.

"That's why I want you guys out here soon... Parents are real good people, well-off, professionals. They're crushed and they have no idea what's going on. We had a warrant and the house is clean, and the boy's story... well, I'm just remembering last time. Another sudden and undiagnosed case of schizophrenia in a town of 12,000 and I'd be wondering if there's some kind of public health threat."

"Have you got anything to fax me? I can probably get up there early this afternoon."

"I'll send you what I've got. Social Services has the boy and they're treating him like an abuse victim. I don't know, it just seems wrong, you'll need to hear it all for yourself."

"I'll call you as soon as I know when I'll be there." Scully pulled out her cell and speed-dialed. "Mulder, it's me." He sounded as if he were waking up, gradually

zeroing in on the sound of her voice.

"Hey, Scully. The office hasn't burned down?"

"Believe it or not we might have a case, Mulder, someone actually called us in. I'm driving out to Renton this afternoon."

"Their werewolves come back?"

"No, that deputy called and said he wants us to interview a boy whose nanny claims he was the subject of ritual abuse." The fax machine was starting to whirl.

"It's gonna take me about an hour to clear up and meet you unless it's an emergency..."

"Actually, Mulder, I was just going to drive out there myself."

"Um, okay." Mulder's line was silent for a moment. "How old's the boy?"

"Seven," she replied. "I've got it, Mulder."

"Yeah, I know. Call me if anything comes up. Be careful."

"You be careful, too."

"Don't worry, Scully, I don't think Alex Krycek is that much of a bookworm."

* * *

Mulder put his phone back down, nodding at the older man who'd been glaring at him over his books as he'd talked to Scully. Oy you, the library is for reading, not talking on that cellular walkie-talkie machine or whatever. He glanced up at the clock in the reading room, squinting slightly. Scully wanted to handle this one on her own for some reason. There'd been so little they'd been allowed to do, and Mulder could tell it had been chafing on Scully as much or more than him. It had freed Mulder to catch up on things that the FBI had no interest whatsoever in, but Scully seemed to need to feel as though she were actually doing what she was being paid for.

The recorded voice of the doomed female cosmonaut in her apartment last night had bumped up against one of the remaining, crumbled stands of Scully's walls of denial.

"Okay, Mulder, this is where we get off."

"What?"

"It's too good. It's too easy. It's a setup. It's breadcrumbs."

"Even if it's a trap, Scully, that doesn't mean we it's not worth investigating." That wasn't how he meant to say it, and they both knew it, but Scully won what argument there had been right there.

"Mulder, I admit there's something unexplained happening. I have seen the evidence myself. But there's enough evidence for us to work on right now without rushing after anything new." She noticed that Mulder's look had changed. A year ago, he would have looked at her as though she were a difficult child that he was tired of humoring. He looked away for a moment, perhaps conscious of the fact that she would no longer accept that from him, yet unsure of what to do in its place.

"So what do you want to do?"

"Let's work on what we have right now and try to make something coherent out of it."

Make something coherent out of it, he thought, leaning back in the library chair and rubbing his eyes. My girlfriend is driving out to Virginia to interview a ritually abused child? My partner is? Scully is?

Coherent. That's the problem. Crimes are rarely coherent; they follow an internal logic that you can understand if you can get deep enough in the mind of the criminal to see from his eyes. The UNSUB almost always wants you to understand, that's why they take hearts, cut off ears, leave reminders, but there's nothing at the center but the wreckage of a broken mind spread out over many lives. And once it starts actually making sense you're losing it, you have to remember where you're starting from and be able to work back to that more or less objective interpretation of reality.

I've had the privilege, he thought, of being exposed to so many conflicting yet internally coherent versions of the truth that I'm about ready to cut off some ears myself. Do they all make sense, or am I able to convince myself that anything makes sense at this point? I lost track of any starting point except Scully months ago, and every time I work my way back there I'm less inclined to set out again.

* * *

I DON'T THINK ALEX/?/KRICHEK IS THAT MUCH OF A BOOKWORM

Spender leaned back in the chair, rubbing his eyes. The terminal glowed green in front of him, a line from the NSA computer sniffing out and transcribing hundreds of thousands of cell-phone and satellite conversations all over the world and delivering Mulder and Scully's to him.

The computer guessed it was a name of some kind, inserting a space where it had heard Mulder do so. By now it would know Mulder's speech patterns well. At least they stayed away from phone sex, Spender thought. He had no idea how the computer would try to render that.

Krichek, Kryczk, Alex, Alexander, Al, he thought as he turned to his PC and cracked open the database. Al Krichek. Sounds like a plumber, or a tow truck driver. After this, get a print of the fax that deputy sent Scully, just for the files. Then run Mulder's library card, see what he pulled out of the archives. Then at two I have to go lie to Skinner about the fact that I spend all day spying on two other agents and maybe him too. Then I'll come back and see if they were on the phone again, and see if Mulder's sent any email to that FAA woman. Then I'll go out after work and get a picture of them tattooed on my chest. Jeffrey Spender, President, Obsessive X-Files Division Fan Number One. Me and One-Armed Wilkins.

He turned back to the database computer. Well, I'll be dipped in shit, he thought. Alexander Krycek (ALIAS) (REAL NAME UNKNOWN). Suspected terrorist, possible murder indictment, impersonating a federal agent, supplementary files out the ass with Mulder's and Skinner's names all over them. Possible indictment... murder of Melissa Marian Scully... P for print and Y for a picture and...

The picture snapped up into high resolution: boyish face, good-looking, slightly

arrogant. Spender felt his balls curl up and try to hide somewhere under his throat. He didn't really need to see "DISTINGUISHING MARKS-PROSTHETIC ARM (RIGHT, ABOVE ELBOW)" to know this man had bought him a few beers and taken the odd manila envelope from him.

* * *

Child Welfare Services
Renton, VA
1:38 PM

"I'm Special Agent Dana Scully, Federal Bureau of Investigation..." A tall, heavily built black man in his late thirties interrupted her, and the receptionist went back to ignoring her. Tickle looked a little heavier than he had last year, and tired.

"Agent Scully? Thanks for coming out here on short notice." He began to lead her down the hallway to her left, past the "Child Welfare Services" sign. "I think we might have an hour at the most before things get strange out here."

"What do you mean?"

"We just had a French consular lawyer show up and we can't talk to Laure Villiers until they sort out what they're doing with her, which is probably going to be a psych assessment in DC." He stopped outside a door. Dana glanced through the window and could see a low table with crayons and construction paper. "I also just got a call from the station; there's news crews coming out from DC. We told them that the boy and the nanny are in County Regional Hospital, but I don't know how long that's going to keep them away." Dana looked into the room again and saw that the boy had taken a seat with his back to the door and was scribbling away at something. He had dark hair, almost black, and his little blue sweatshirt had a number 98 on the back. "Nothing brings them out like the promise of devil worship..."

"Thanks. I'll see what I can do." She saw Tickle taking up a position in front of the door, broad back nearly blocking the small window. Damn it, she thought as she flashed her badge at the social worker straightening a pile of children's books. The boy's name was... was... "Hi, Jared."

He turned around.

"Hi." He looked at her. "Okay. You came." He turned back to his paper, picking another crayon. "I haven't finished yet." She walked up beside him, bending down.

"I'm Dana. Can I sit down?"

"Yup." He looked at his crayons, picking up and studying green, settling on gray. "They told me to draw this for you."

"Who told you, Jared? Your parents?" The boy shook his head. Purple this time.

"Did Laure tell you?" He put down his crayon.

"Is Laure okay?" Jared asked.

"Yes, she's fine. She's still a little sick but she's okay." Scully replied.

"Good. She was really scared." Jared finishes his line carefully.

"So why were you drawing this for me?"

"They told me to. They said you were coming. Sorry I'm not done yet." Black, now.

"It's okay, Jared. Who told you I was coming?"

"I'm not finished yet, Dana. Just a minute, 'kay? I think the nurse has coffee over there, you can drink it if you want."

"No thanks, Jared."

"There's apple juice, too." He didn't look up as he said it. He put the black crayon down and studied the piece of paper.

"Okay, maybe I will." The social worker had left the room. Dana walked over to the counter against one wall. She took a tiny blue plastic cup and poured apple juice from a box, then returned to her tiny seat. Well, at least my feet reach the floor on this one, she thought.

"There." Jared announced. He didn't look like a serious boy. He was slightly round-faced and cheerful, but he gave the impression that he was doing something very important. He pushed the paper out in front of her.

"What's this, Jared?"

Two purple lines cut the paper in three equal parts the short way. In the lower left corner there were several small stick figures, and a little globe in green and blue. At the top right, several black squares, one large, a couple of smaller ones around it.

Nope, no Satan in this one, Dana thought.

In the central space were a few more stick figures, directly in the middle of the column. Their heads were elongated, almost heart-shaped, with oval eyes. They were drawn in gray.

"They told me to draw this." His small finger hovered over the gray figures.

"How did they tell you that, Jared?"

"In my head. Like on Voyager. That's just what they look like. It's not really what they are." He paused. "There's a lady too. She's hard to understand, and really scared. They said she's sort of in jail, but she didn't do anything wrong." An underwater voice, counting, reentering, heading into fire, Dana remembered.

"This is where we live. That's the earth, this is space. There's other people here, too, like aliens but they're mostly like us." He pointed around the leftmost column. "The middles... when they come here, they're aliens, like that, but that's not really them. It's like they're playing a computer game, almost. We can't cross this line." He pointed to the first purple line. "This in the middle here, is where they live. They make sure we stay here, on this side of the line."

It wasn't difficult to follow. The initial psychiatric interview Tickle had faxed her had shown him to be bright, but not in an unusual range, no previous emotional or psychological difficulties, and as based in reality as any seven-year-old. He'd obviously heard something from someone, but where, and why?

"What's over here, Jared?"

"There's another line. That's why the middles started talking. They tried to explain it to me. Over here, the black ones, they're bad."

"What do you mean bad, Jared?"

"Like monsters. Except they don't have bodies, and the middles try to keep them over there." The sun was streaming in through the playroom's windows as a seven-year-old described a complex dualistic cosmology to her. "The middles said that some of them did something wrong, and the black ones are starting to get out."

"How?"

"If they can get out, they can break the lines there so all of them can come."

"They want to come here?"

"Everywhere."

"When do you talk to the middles, Jared?"

"All the time. Right now." He shivered once. "They said to tell you that you know who the lady is. She's an astronaut. She went into space and she never came down until now." There was nothing unusual about the boy, his eyes didn't glow, nor his voice echo. Scully knew this feeling, nerves prickling, belly hollow. It took her a moment to formulate her question for the boy, in the silence broken only by remembered voices.

"Have you talked to anyone else about this?"

"Just Laure. And David, the policeman, and Susan." Scully guessed Susan was a social worker, or a nurse. "I didn't tell them too much. I was supposed to wait for you."

"Not your parents? Nobody at school?" Wait for me? Scully thought.

"Uh-uh." I don't know whether I'm sorry Mulder's not here or not, she thought as she

s o k o l

got up from her chair. Tickle was rapping on the door, and he cracked it open and leaned in.

"Agent Scully, someone's setting up a camera by the front desk." She turned back to the boy.

"Jared, are you going to be okay?" He looked at her strangely.

"Yeah. I'm not sick."

"I'm going to come back with a friend of mine, tonight if I can or tomorrow morning, and I want you to talk to him too, okay?"

"You mean your boyfriend?"

"What?"

"He has brown hair, and he wears a suit, and you've been together a very long time."

"Who told you that?"

"They did. They know you."

"I'll come and talk to you as soon as I can, Jared."

"Okay." He turned back to his crayons. "Don't forget your picture." She picked it up, rolling it loosely. Tickle herded her down the hallway in the opposite direction from the front desk, where she saw TV lights. They rounded the corner and he stopped suddenly, cutting her off.

"Now I want you to tell me what the hell is going on, Agent Scully."

"I'm going to have to talk to Agent Mulder first. He's a... he has much more experience in these kind of cases."

"I want to know why the hell that boy asked for you." He watched Scully lean against a wall.

"What are you talking about?" she replied. Somehow, it seemed to the deputy that she wasn't entirely surprised.

"He knew yours and Agent Mulder's names. He just said to call you."

"Why didn't you mention that before?"

"Because this is all wrong, Agent Scully. I may not be an FBI Special Agent but I can tell when something is fucked up, and this shit is fucked up." He leaned back and glanced down the hallway, then back to her. "If he told you the same shit he told me either I am on a un-fucking-funny version of Candid Camera or if I went anywhere besides to you two with this shit..." He slowed for a moment. "Look, I'm sorry. I don't know what the fu... what's going on here and I was hoping you might. I know these people, I know all these people. It's good to know Becky and Derek Keelor aren't killing goats in their basement. But... some of the things that boy told me and the social worker... and then he just looks up from his crayons and says 'call Scully'."

Oh, good, Scully thought. I'm getting equal billing now. Maybe I have my own listing in the Weird White Pages. She stood up straight.

"I'm going to have to talk to Mul... Agent Mulder about this. This isn't a hoax per se, but it's probably not what it seems. I think it would be best if he stayed here. He said he'd talked to you and Susan?"

"She's one of the child welfare staff, yeah."

"It would be best for all concerned if you could try to keep this quiet for the next day or two. When's the girl's psych assessment?"

"I don't know. I think the French consulate guy was going to be doing that. There's someone coming from DC on Monday to talk to Jared though."

"Where are his parents?"

"I told them to go home," Tickle responded. "I tried to make it sound as good as I could but they're not allowed to see him until Monday. Technically, you're not either, and I don't know if I'll be able to slip you in here while the media circus is going out there."

"I don't have any jurisdiction here right now," Scully said. "I can't tell you what to do until I talk to Agent Mulder."

"Yeah." The police officer looked down the hallway again. "Maybe the shrink will just come in on Monday and tell us Jared's been sneaking downstairs to watch Millennium."

* * *

She was a safe three miles onto the 95 before she pounded hard on the steering wheel, twice. She could feel the massive gears turning around her, around him, as though they were tiny bright pins in the mechanism. Critical for the moment, no doubt, but easily replaced. The machine would chew on, great grinding wheels leaving splinters behind.

* * *

X-Files Division Office

5:23 PM

"So how was Renton?" Mulder had at least 300 pages of photocopies and the VCR set up. He hadn't gotten to do one of his vaguely professorial presentations since Chaney, Texas, the specifics of which Scully generally preferred to forget. She had regained her composure on the long drive back to DC and had settled into a general irritatedness-irritated at whoever was trying to set them up, at the general principle of being set up, and at the even more general principle that being set up was part of their normal work routine. She dropped Jared's drawing on Mulder's desk. Mulder traded her, handing her a neatly folded slip of paper.

NOT YOUR USUAL. Krycek's neat capitals again.

"Shit," Scully swore, dropping herself in the chair across from Mulder. He held up the drawing she'd handed him.

"Scully, all these times we've gone on long car trips and you've never shared your crayons?"

"That is a Jared Keelor original, as described to the seven-year old artist by means of telepathic messages by what he calls the 'middles', represented in the center of the page and who it seems we can identify with little gray men." Scully rocked the chair back slightly. "I should also add that this particular piece was commissioned at the request of the EBE's depicted for one Dana Scully and her 'boyfriend,' as the artist put it."

"I knew we shouldn't have done it in the field that time. They saw." Scully was somewhat relieved to see Mulder's even-I-can't-believe-this-shit look cross his face as he hung his head back over the edge of the chair. She explained the rest of the story, including Jared's description of the "lady astronaut," trying to keep as neutral as possible given that Mulder didn't exactly appear to be eating it up.

"Scully, I hate to say this..." He spun his chair away from the desk and headed to the VCR stand. "This came by courier today. I didn't get it till I got back from the library. The address label said it was from Sherry Tsang but it had that note inside."

The tape started suddenly. There were voices, sounds in a different language. Russian, and something else. It was a meeting room of some kind, with natural light. A round table with a few chairs. Two men entered, one white, short, heavysset, with a thick shock of silver hair and a red face. The other was a tall young man, East Indian, lean strong muscles in a summer suit. He pulled out the chair for the older man, and sat down just at the edge of the frame.

"Spot the G-man, eh Scully?" Mulder said softly. The older man harrumphed, and looked directly at the camera, saying something in Russian. The young man responded.

"Okay," the old man said, in a thick accent. Another man sat down beside the old Russian, directly across from the young man. He was Indian as well, almost stereotypically so, in some stylish update of a Nehru jacket with matching trousers and small wire glasses. He was slim, and his head was shaved. The camera jerked sideways to include him, the young man opposite excluded except for his arms resting on the table. Mulder paused the tape.

"That's Dr. Vijay Pandhu. He was briefly a very big name in the late 70's and early 80's in parapsychological research. He started out as a skeptic, trying to debunk Buddhist lamas' claims of reincarnation. Somewhere along the line he ended up

changing his tune and did a very provocative lecture tour-- I heard him speak once, in England-- regarding fingerprinting people's auras in an attempt to try to find them in future incarnations. He dropped out of sight for the most part in 1987, '88." Mulder restarted the video.

"We will do it in English then, for our American friends," the Russian said patronizingly.

"Academician Tsvigun, we would like to ask you a few questions about your work on the Soviet space program in the early 1960s." Pandhu's voice was musical, slightly hypnotic, a rich collection of layered accents.

"Good, good, we did good work," the Russian said jovially. "Though I was not an Academician then, I was a captain in the Air Force, and then the Strategic Rocket Troops."

"I would like to ask you some questions, if I may, about Galina Kovalyova." The Russian chuckled. He seemed jovial, a friendly old man.

"Sure, what is it now anyway. Galya was good, not like the others, not just somebody's daughter or a stupid, dull Komsomol girl. She was a good Communist, sure, they all had to be, but she could really fly. Most of them, they would take them up once in the back seat of a MiG trainer, make sure they don't puke, call them a test pilot. She flew jets, even one of the MiG-21s, they were new then. Not that it really mattered, in the capsule you didn't really have to do anything anyway. But she was still better, seriozhna, a real Soviet officer." In Russian, he asked something of the young man, whose arms disappeared from the field of view.

"That was why they picked her, I think, to be first. It was very uncertain, and very dangerous. But she very much wanted to go, and it was her duty." The summer-suited arms placed a glass of water beside the Russian, who picked it up and took a short swallow.

"I was the deputy... po angliskiy... safety officer, range safety officer. The launch went well enough, it wasn't as sophisticated as now. Everything was all right until the separation of the capsule from the final stage, the insertion into the orbit was wrong, wrong altitude, wrong trajectory, and we could tell from the radar track that the last stage had broken up. Captain Kovalyova reported that the separation had

been very rough, but she was all right and could not see any damage to the capsule. She was supposed to do eleven orbits, that was going to be a huge slap in the face to the Americans whose best man had only managed one. So we decided to go ahead with the mission as planned while we tried to figure out how to get her down." He took another sip of his water.

"This was not the space shuttle. If things did not go according to plan you had to make it up as you went along. She was too high, and too..." he lifted an arm and inclined it, tracing an arc with his finger, "tilted and elongated, elliptical. We didn't know yet how to plan an acceptable reentry trajectory from that kind of orbit, so everyone sat down and tried to figure it out."

"The flight was still a secret?" Dr. Pandhu asked.

"All flights were secret then, until they were over. The Americans, too. You don't want to admit failure when your national reputation is a matter of national security. You've probably never heard of Captain Gary Childs, United States Air Force, either. The flight was supposed to take three, three and some days, I don't remember. Captain Kovalyova was good, I told you, she turned off all the lights, unhooked as many of the sensors and instruments as she could to save power immediately, before we even told her things did not look so good for getting her down in time. You have to keep in mind, you know, the Vostok was basically a chair in a little metal sphere. You could not get out, move around, do anything, it was like being in a jet fighter, really."

"It was seven days-- seven days-- before she reported that the air was getting very bad. I mean, we knew, after three, four days the filters would be breaking down. She had not turned the lights on since the first day, and I think she was disregarding our instructions to turn the heater on when the capsule was out of the sun because she would sleep then, but you could hear her teeth chatter, sometimes, as she slept. She had cut into her pressure suit to get at some of the water from the cooling system in it. We didn't know what to do. There was no way to make a safe reentry. The jets, the attitude control, on the capsule did not have enough fuel to correct the orbit she was in. She knew this, I told you, yet she stayed there for ten days while we dithered, no light, no heat, no food, a little water, sleeping to save her air." He picked up the glass in front of him and then set it down again without drinking.

"It was the morning of the eleventh day. We had worked out a possible trajectory

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that would bring her down in the water north of Hawaii, and had diverted Navy ships there. This was not an American capsule, ours were supposed to come down on land, so, if she did come down we had to be right there. But it was not, not good chance. We had not heard from her in nine, ten hours, and we needed her to manually fire one of the thruster burns. I say, we were certain she was dead. The temperature in the capsule had been ten, fifteen below for days, no food, bad air. Then suddenly, there she was, 'Sokol zdyes,' that was her call sign, 'sokol,' falcon. We explained to her what we were going to try, and she says 'That is good, I am very honored to be the first Soviet woman in space but I would very much like to come down now.'" The Russian smiled.

Scully felt herself smile as well. First. That mattered. The first, the bravest, the furthest, throwing branches down on your brothers from the top of the tree.

"We all laughed, because even though she sounded terrible you could almost hear her, you know, smiling, and she was seriozhna, a very serious girl, no jokes, it was the closest we had ever heard her to making a joke. So we began the burn, the course correction to bring her out of orbit, and it worked at first. It was shallow, long, but it looked possible. This wasn't with a computer, it was yelling 'do it now!' Galya was calling out the readings, we didn't really need them but it was something for the cosmonaut to do to keep them, you know, busy. Then my superior, the safety officer, he runs down to the men who are plotting her trajectory and then to the phone that goes to Moscow. She is coming down, but the trajectory is too long, she is going to come down somewhere just near Seattle, where there are many American navy ships." The Russian leaned forward on the table, his shoulders hunched. Now he drank.

"You remember the time. It was 1961. The order came to destroy the capsule, to keep it from falling into enemy hands. There is a range safety device for this, a simple explosive charge, but it did not respond. They fired the thrusters again to change her trajectory, so the capsule would burn up. There was not much fuel left, it was not immediate. She would not have known, when it happens it happens, but she stayed there, calling the numbers, when we knew that we had killed her. I remember her saying 'I will reenter!' and then the capsule breaking up on the radar."

"So there was an order given that resulted in her death?" Dr. Pandhu asked. Scully jerked perceptibly at the change of voice, as if waking. Mulder glanced at her, and she dismissed his concern with a small wave.

"Yes, from Moscow, I suppose. It was bad. None of us slept for days after and we had not slept during the mission either. My boss, the safety officer, he got very drunk after that and I had to take his pistol away, he was going to shoot himself. Then, nobody talked about it. We said that a MiG had crashed, and made her a Major, and her mother buried an empty box. But what were we supposed to do? It was the time, even with Khrushchev, if she had come down to the Americans the KGB would probably have shot the whole lot of us. And the Americans would have done the same thing, don't lie to yourself."

"Thank you, Academician," the Indian man said gently. "We have all done things in service of politics. I thank you for this. It is possible, you know, that we might do some good for Major Kovalyova still." He turned rapidly, facing the camera, said something quickly in neither English nor Russian. The picture snapped to black, then blue as the tape ended.

Mulder was silent, looking at his partner. She seemed to be studying her thumbnail, specifically the left one, hands clasped on top of her knees.

"Thoughts...?" he led.

"You think this is real?" she began quietly.

"Tsvigun's for real, looked him up on the Internet. Pandhu... fits vaguely within his documented research interests, especially if you follow where he's leading."

"Based on wrongful, violent death, this would be a haunting, Mulder?"

"Scully, look, even if you're undecided about the existence of ghosts, or something similar, you have to admit that within the literature and the study on the subject there is a strong correlation between the manifestation of a ghost and violent or wrongful death. Galina Kovalyova was murdered."

"Well, within the right literature there's also a strong correlation between leaving your door unlocked and wandering little girls eating your porridge. But we're not talking about a ghost, Mulder, we're talking about antique Russian space capsules falling out of the sky with ...biological material... in them. And radio transmissions, and... it's all very concrete, Mulder, even if it doesn't make any sense. Oh, and need I

add that seventy per cent of our information is coming from one Alex Krycek?"

Mulder patted his large pile of papers and waved Jared's drawing.

"I always thought of Krycek as more of a watercolors guy, Scully. Like I said, regardless of the source, something is going on here."

"Well, there's no denying that, Mulder." She looked at the boy's drawing again. "I wish... I wish it wasn't like this. The spaceship, the cosmonaut, if it's true it's fascinating, it's inspiring. She should be remembered, like Yuri Gagarin or John Glenn or Neil Armstrong." Scully paused, unfocused and quiet. "That's the only way to really kill heroes, to forget them."

"Do you have any idea how crazy I am about you right now?" Mulder said softly.

"Oh, I've known that you're crazy for quite some time. I'm just kind of going with it now."

"I'll buy dinner if you promise to get misty about space exploration at least one more time," he offered with a disturbing sincerity.

"Maybe. But if you're still trying to convince me that this is a space haunting by eleven PM, I'm withholding sex."

"Oh, is that so?" he chuckled.

"Yep," she nodded nonchalantly, rising and beginning to pack up the day's papers.

"Is that how it's gonna work?"

"It sure is. I should have thought of this years ago."

* * *

Ft. Meade, Maryland

5:52 PM

Alex Krycek was sick of airplanes.

I don't even know what fucking day it is anymore. I know I'm on the early side of the country now, he thought as the guard slipped his card through the reader and the door hissed open in front of him, allowing him down a hall of briefing rooms.

"Why is he here?" the smoker asked Vijay Pandhu. The dark-skinned man glanced over his shoulder at Krycek entering the room, then resumed his relaxed, slightly sideways position in the chair. The smoker stood up, tugging at his jacket. "He's not cleared for this."

"Does it matter at this point?" Dr. Pandhu replied.

"He killed the FAA inspector. Why?" Dr. Pandhu shrugged.

"You said you had something to show me. You first, then we can ask questions." He gestured at the television. The smoker shrugged, shaking off Pandhu's condescension.

"This is from the remote viewing session last night. You weren't present."

Surveillance camera, ceiling corner of a white room, gray table. One man in fatigues facing another, books open in front of one. There was a blood pressure cuff attached to the other, and an electrode running into the open neck of his jacket. He reeled off a string of numbers. The other pressed his finger to an earphone.

"Verified, begin."

Cuff-and-electrodes, whom Krycek assumed was the 'remote viewer', snapped his head up.

"Time advancing has made change in information given to you necessary three eight five nine."

"Verified, continue," the controller replied.

"We have been acting as mediation between separated reality entities beings in different frames of reference unobservable to each other four nine three three." Each word was stressed, the 'viewer' nodding forward on the first syllables.

"Verified, continue."

"Maintenance of our superiority in psychic countermeasures is becoming difficult this transmission may be compromised seven seven one eight."

"Verified, continue."

"Frame of reference separated from yours inhabitants growing in strength due to unknown factors. Offensive action likely two nine four five."

"Verified, continue."

"Countermeasures to offensive psychic activity are being circumvented in order to provide point of entry through periodic orbital psychic phenomenon six three one eight."

"Verified, interrupt, query."

"Query, proceed."

"Specify periodic orbital psychic phenomenon." The viewer's head jerked, and his mouth made an exaggerated motion. His flat Midwest voice wrapped itself around a set of female consonants.

"Sokol, zdyes." His mouth stretched again, grimacing, male again.

"Remnant, psychic, other frame of reference inhabitants unspecified method utilise to open door for offensive action and movement five seven eight four."

"Verified, continue."

"Transmission compromise likely door is being constructed based on remnant phenomenon must be stopped, interrupted, phenomenon is cyclical and strength increasing six one four nine."

"Verified continue."

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"Transmission compromise imminent, transfer to direct viewing, transmission may be jammed or replaced. Oh God..."

"David, verify."

"It's a vehicle, human, aerospace, spherical. Current position orbital, unknown, occupant one, female, status unknown. Vehicle may be a psychic phenomenon, strong presence, nonterrestrial, nondimensional I am being contacted Ohhhhhh..." The viewer rocked back in his chair. Krycek noted that there was a belt around his belly, and small chains on his arms that would allow him to manipulate the paper and pencil in front of him but not reach anyone else or himself.

"David, withdraw, beginning jamming."

"They want bodies they have been there so long we have been here so long" The viewer's head snapped back and he screamed, raggedly, loud enough that the microphone snapped and distorted. His arms twitched, restrained, and Krycek saw his feet kicking frantically. The controller across from him stood up, backing away from the table.

"Increase jamming, I need medical and emergency, this is an unplanned transfer, requesting egress..."

The man he had called David screamed again, and there was a popping sound. Krycek saw a dark line appear along one of the straining arms, the fingers suddenly dark with blood, then the other arm. Blood spilled from under the man's hairline as his scream rose in pitch. Suddenly there was a wet, ripping noise, a band of flesh tearing up from the man's arm, peeling back lengthwise, lifting and flapping like a useless tentacle. Then more. The man's arms were bloody pinwheels of waving ribbon flesh, slick red bones and tendons flailing and snapping underneath, still restrained by the chains. His forehead was trying to split and peel forward and backward, and there was a great pool of blood underneath his chair, odd wiggling movements inside the legs of his pants.

It was quiet, suddenly, except for a muffled sob from the controller.

"Clear, clear, jesus christ clear, get somebody in here oh jesus oh jesus."

Pandhu still sat comfortably in the chair, but Krycek thought that if the furniture was suddenly whipped out from under the Indian he would hover there, held by sheer tension, balancing on the flexed toes of one foot. The smoker punched the stop button and turned to Pandhu.

"You didn't attend the remote viewing because you knew what was going to happen. You have been in contact with the Colonists somehow and you knew about this, all of this. What more do you know? What was that message?"

"If it was not for our group you would still be swapping experiments with your 'Colonists,' the extraterrestrial equivalent of a neo-Nazi motorcycle gang! Do not threaten me and do not presume to bull your way into what you cannot understand!" Pandhu waved his hand dismissively. "I can give you no more specific information beyond what you have probably already discerned. The Colonists, as you have called them, have had some role in restraining an apparently atavistic entity, or entities, which may be partially or completely extradimensional or exist in a psychic mode. They released it, on purpose, for reasons of their own, and now they have lost control."

"I know many other things about the 'Colonists' and their activities, but I am not one of you. Our group operates on trust and respect. I have disclosed the truth on the matter of real urgency, what you just saw there."

"Did you disclose the truth to Fox Mulder?"

"What does it matter to whom we disclose the truth? And no, I did not. Not yet. But I reserve the right to do so as should any compassionate being on this planet!" Pandhu stood up from the chair and walked directly to the smoker.

"You have seen the reports, my friend? The French consular dispatch, not a hundred miles from here? The Chinese fortune teller in Paris speaking Russian? The supposed mutilation deaths of three young women involved in a Wiccan ritual in Scotland?" He turned away from the smoker for a moment, composing himself. He spoke quietly.

"The Gatekeepers, those my group are in contact with, are trying to warn anyone who can listen that the others are trying to slip through. For some reason they cannot. When they try to exist here that happens, that... destruction of the host. They

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are doing something, something related to the space capsule crashes in Washington. I have my suspicions which I will share when I am more certain."

"Go to your group, as will I. You and your... Consortium... have an inkling of the danger. If we cannot discover and prevent what is happening within a short time, I and the others of my group will release the information everywhere." The smoker's stiffness returned, his initiative.

"Involving Mulder is a mistake. He is not motivated like you and I, Doctor. We have duties. We have responsibilities. Mulder cares for nothing except what he finds."

"For the time, my friend, that may do." Dr. Pandhu turned and walked quickly out of the room. Krycek stood. The smoker was gratified to see the young man slightly unnerved.

"Congratulations, Alex, you're cleared," he said, tugging at a half-pack of cigarettes.

* * *

Krycek almost-jogged down the hall after Pandhu. The Indian stopped and turned towards him. Krycek looked around. This whole facility existed inside a cloak of secrecy, but within nothing would be secret. There was no harm in saying it here.

"He's right, you know. About Mulder. He's... irresponsible. He has no concept of the implications of what he does."

Pandhu glanced at Krycek's arm.

"Your opinion of Mulder is not... colored?"

"It's based on experience."

"Mr. Krycek," Pandhu turned and started walking again, "your opinion is noted. I will proceed along the course I think is appropriate. Mulder is one man, as are we all." Pandhu stopped, turning to Krycek again. "His usefulness will end, as will all of ours, eventually. When that happens, don't worry, he is yours."

* * *

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iii

l i k e a h u r r i c a n e

South Side Gym
Washington, DC
7:40 PM

"That's real good, you got some good stuff. Your footwork is excellent and you got good speed on your left. But you have to watch it up here." Skinner tapped the young Cuban kid's sparring helmet with his glove.

"You gotta stay frosty. Soon as I offer you anything you're getting hot and jumping at it. You're getting too excited. Against a more experienced fighter that's trouble. You've got the rest of the skills coming together good as long as you learn to fight cool. You work on that and you're gonna whip any younger guy around. All right?"

"Thanks, man." They popped their gloves against each other and swung over the ropes. 'Age and treachery' was still working pretty good for him, he thought. He had to admit to a caveman tendency; he couldn't work out in a gym with women one-third his age bobbing around in sports bras, fake kickboxing bullshit, or stationary riding in front of a movie screen while some "personal fitness consultant" pretended you were on a bike tour. He liked this place. It was rough, young, but there was a lot of respect between the older guys here--himself, a couple of black and Mexican cops,

lots of blue-collar city workers--and the kids picked up on it.

And it smelled right, too. Well, it smelled like a moderately well-used jock with an overtone of mildewed brick, but that was right under the circumstances.

He sat down on one of the benches. Rolling one shoulder backwards, Skinner admitted to himself that the kid had got one real good one in there even if his old reflexes managed to dodge most of it. No paperwork this weekend, he'd decided. Tonight was quiet night, time to go home alone and make sure he was well rested. His latest rebellion against common sense was Margie, a smart-talking thirty-one-year-old network...something... analyst... something... who also happened to be a regional tae kwon do champion. He was quite certain she'd tried to kill him in a unique way last weekend, and they were going to drive out to the coast tomorrow afternoon. It was the first time they wouldn't be kidding, not saying "oops, we went to dinner and ended up having sex again."

His gym bag rang or, more precisely, his cell phone rang inside it. Maybe after this weekend Margie would have his cell number, but not yet.

Damn and hell.

"Skinner."

"It's Spender, sir. I don't think we should talk on this line."

Damn and hell.

* * *

"You know this guy Krycek?"

Spender had rolled the window down to let the smoke out. The older man had smiled indulgently.

"Oh, yes."

"Did you know he was calling himself Wilkins, using bogus Bureau credentials to get me to spy on Mulder?"

"I certainly had my suspicions," the smoker responded. "You confirmed them for me the other night."

"Why didn't you mention this?"

"Because I'm trying to preserve your access, Agent Spender. You didn't need to know until it was time to move against Krycek and his handlers."

No leverage, Jeffrey thought. I'm the low man on the totem pole here.

"Skinner wants to take him down," he said. "He's going to put something together off the books, keep it out of channels until he's got Krycek in cuffs."

The smoker studied the lit end of his cigarette thoughtfully, as if it were new to him.

"That's not an entirely bad idea. Something overt, based in the process of law. Krycek knows where a lot of bodies are buried, might try to make a deal. It could give us leverage. You're going along with it?"

"Right in the middle."

"That's good. It's important that Skinner trusts you, knows he can count on you." He stubbed out his cigarette in Jeffrey's ashtray, climbed out of the car. He turned around before pushing the door shut. "Be careful. Krycek's a dangerous man, and he will not go down easily."

* * *

Somewhere in Washington, DC
Sunday, May 31
Evening

"Dr. Pandhu, you have made a grave error by informing Agent Mulder of this affair." The fat man, Angelo, was unique among his company in that he played no games with his eyes. He glared straight at you, unblinking, like a moray waiting in its cave.

"You forget, as always, that there are others in this game. You do not represent the entirety of the world or the opinions of all its leaders."

"You know what the world is ready for! Not this!" the Englishman's chair spun around. The outburst startled the smoker, though nothing would betray that. It was enough for him merely to be there. His return to events, to the game, had given him power within the loose structure of the upper levels. His old clients and supplicants had flooded back to him, to his appearance of immortality.

"Keith," Pandhu began, leaning towards the white-haired man, "how long have we known each other? Listen to me-- it does not matter who is 'ready' and who is not. We must open ourselves to all possibilities. Your Project-- for all its scope, for all its grandeur-- never envisioned anything like this. Neither did we."

"We have mechanisms in place to mobilize the necessary resources to deal with this," the fat man began. "These mechanisms do not operate openly. To give Mulder the information, to encourage him to dig deeper... a grave error." He turned his moray face to the smoker. "I'm afraid the time has come."

"I'll have Mulder and his partner brought in. I believe they will be useful here, even willing, knowing what they know." He paused, lighting a new cigarette. The Englishman shook his head slowly.

"Terminate them."

The light burned, two inches to the side of the cigarette, pausing, moving carefully over.

"Are you certain?"

"Our group will not stand for this," Pandhu stood from the chair, straightening his jacket. "You will force our hand."

"We cannot afford to have any wild cards, Vijay. Not now." Like all of the Englishman's pronouncements it carried a layer of dutiful regret. "Not when all plans must be reconsidered." He looked at the smoker. "You have your instructions."

"Yes." It was difficult, always a mind game, who was in the position to decide when

a meeting was at an end. Pandhu simplified it for them.

"You are making what will be the first of many grave errors, Keith." He strode out of the room, made taller by indignation. The smoker nodded. He hadn't heard anyone call the Englishman 'Keith' in many, many years.

* * *

"I must speak with you." He had heard Pandhu behind him, softly speaking to his driver in another tongue, presumably telling him to wait. The smoker turned to him, but said nothing. "You are interested in protecting Mulder, aren't you?"

"The woman, Sherry Tsang. Why did you have Krycek kill her?"

"I wanted to impress a sense of urgency on Mulder," Pandhu answered, looking away from the smoker and surveying the cars in the parking garage. "My observations of him indicated that he was not pursuing the investigation with the vigor I had expected. Mr. Krycek's involvement made them wary."

The smoker exhaled, spoke.

"I believe Mulder is more useful in ...other arenas," he said. "To keep him away from the new project on the West Coast was necessary. It was too unknown, too volatile. To eliminate him is shortsighted. If we eliminate him, we must also eliminate Agent Scully, another piece I believe is valuable. A list begins to form. The repercussions will be too great, and our options for the future will be limited. Just because circumstances have changed, we should not avoid long-term planning for the new conditions."

"I care nothing for Mulder, except that he is useful to us. You saw what we are dealing with. He is already on the scent, I have made sure of that. We must encourage him. He will bring us what he finds because he will have nowhere else to go. I assure you of it."

"You seem very confident of Mulder's investigative skills," the smoker said. "His resources and actions have been severely limited."

"Strictly speaking, it is not so much what I wish Mulder to find as what I wish to

ensure finds him."

Pandhu sensed something. The smoker was evading him, just barely, almost imperceptibly.

"I cannot do anything on the basis of your assurances, Dr. Pandhu. I can take certain steps to ensure Mulder's survival in the short term, to give him, you might say, a break."

"Thank you. It will be for the best." He nodded to the smoker, perhaps a sixteenth of a bow, and returned to his waiting driver.

* * *

FBI Headquarters
Washington, DC
Monday, June 1 1998
11:30 AM

In the elevator, I take Scully's hand again, our wrists crossing, unmistakable. Scully, as always, launches herself forward as soon as the doors open, head tilted down at first and turning up during the longest stride she can possibly take. It's only the slight swing of her arm that reminds us of our connection and our hands drop, fingers brushing, half a Scully-step onto the fourth floor. Skinner had called down to the office with one of his always-polite requests that we both present ourselves immediately, 'if not fucking sooner' the understood imperative.

* * *

Scully had come over to my place Friday after work and dinner and didn't leave till Sunday afternoon. It seemed like we both had permanent little smiles pasted on ourselves by sometime late Saturday morning. This, despite a three-hour Friday night shift of arguing over every case ever printed in English of material hauntings. Eleven had come, and I decided to stop trying just in time to be paid off with one of Scully's unbelievable, must-be-something-to-do-with-anatomical-knowledge blowjobs which are probably leaving ectoplasmic ecstasy phantoms rattling around my apartment building.

"I told you you couldn't do it."

"Well, did we have sex, Mulder?" She rested the point of her chin on my hip. The hungry, eager sound of her when I had erupted in her mouth a few minutes before was still slinking around my brain, catcrawling.

"Don't laugh, Agent Mulder, this is an issue of importance to our commander in chief." Scully straddled me, all motion and wriggle, her hips pushing her soft, wet sex in an oval on my belly. She leaned forward.

"Agent Mulder, did you, at any point in that evening, insert your penis into Agent Scully's vagina?"

"Not as I recall, ma'am."

"So, technically speaking, did you have sex with Agent Scully? Did you insert your fingers into her, Agent Mulder? Did you rub her clitoris, perhaps?" Her hair fell around both of our faces, curtaining off her words from the rest of the room.

"Uh, I don't think so..."

"What did you do with Agent Scully? Did you leave her tight, hot, wet pussy empty?" Scully's face was two inches from mine, her eyes closed, her breath hot, lips parted.

"I didn't do a thing to her, ma'am. I barely laid a hand on her."

"Let me speculate, Agent Mulder, did she suck your thick, hard cock until you came in her mouth?" Her mouth was a half inch from my ear, her hips rocking against my belly, her breasts settling on me.

"As I recall the events of that night, that could have happened..."

"That's rather self-centered of you, Agent Mulder. You did nothing at all to relieve Agent Scully's obvious sexual tension? Certainly, Agent Mulder, she must have been dripping wet, hot?"

"You're right... I was in serious neglect of my duties..." I cupped Scully's ass with one

hand, reaching between her legs and feeling her sticky-hot-slippery-sweet with the other. Her hips jerked eagerly, thrusting my two long fingers one joint inside her.

"It's not too late to make it up, Agent Mulder..." I yanked her gorgeous ass up towards me, looking up to watch her settle her arms on the wall, settle in, wriggling her hips to a just-so position. Her little clit, poking out just a bit from its soft shroud, brushed right over my nose as my mouth met her second, softer, wetter one. I thrust my tongue up inside her while gently sucking, French-kissing her sex, and felt Scully's groan vibrate down her spine. Reaching one hand up from behind her ass, over her thigh, I could just tickle the shaft of her clit with one fingertip. Looking up past her taut belly and the sweet swells of her breasts I could see her smiling, eyes closed, biting her lower lip while I nipped at other, still lower ones. Scully trimmed herself to a neat, small, sparse triangle, the silky bloom of her sex almost completely bare. I'm not picky about these things, but the idea that Scully did something intimate to herself, for an intimate purpose, drove me crazy.

"Yeah, Mulder, yeah, mmmm..." She was leaning forward, against the wall at the head of my bed, getting leverage to move herself back and forth so I could alternate between thrusting my tongue inside her sweet depth and sucking on the bud of her clitoris. She held herself with her hips pushed slightly back, bent forward and her forehead pressed against the wall, my nose pressing into her soft patch and my lips on her clit. I pressed up on the underside of it with my tongue, gently bringing my teeth down on top, rolling it and sucking and rocking back and forth slightly, returning in miniature what she had done to me a few minutes before. I was throbbing hard again, amazingly, my cock begging to bury itself in Scully's tight, beautiful pussy.

"Ohfuckohfuckohfuck..." Scully's ass was slick with sweat, her muscles clenched tight, strong thighs twitching as she struggled to breathe. She came in hard, short, shuddery rushes, not one big explosion, except for the sudden rush of wetness that ran onto my chin. Her spine sagged, and she slipped back down my body, panting, her sex burning against my chest and my nose just above her navel. I pushed her down, sliding her compact body along mine, somehow my cock nudging once against her inner thigh before sliding right into her. Her groan was subsonic, straight from her chest into mine where she pressed against me. It was like being suspended in liquid, high-pressure honey, the inside of her swollen and soft and wet. She lay still, knees pulled up on either side of my hips, and I rocked myself up into her hard and fast, feeling her fingers fluttering against my biceps, her head pressing up under

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my chin as I thrust up inside her. I could feel whispers from her, breath passing over my nipple, but I couldn't hear over the creaking of the bed and the faint wet sound of our joining. I gripped her beautiful rear tightly, spreading her, speeding up the pace of my thrusts.

"Comeoncomeoncomeon..." I heard that, felt Scully squeezing me, thought about licking her, fucking the pretty delicate opening that my tongue had probed. It was hard, almost forcing it so soon after I had come before, twice as draining, and my body dropped away from me as the bed spun.

I was brought back by Scully panting against me, squeezing my arm slightly.

"Jusgonnanomovekay?"

I recognized that as 'I'm rather tired, and believe I will lie here on top of you for a while and rest, that is if you don't mind' in post-orgasmic Scullese. She lay, and I ran my hands drunkenly up and down her hips until the night's persistent heat carried me away as well.

* * *

I know Scully had woken up about seven-thirty, pulled on a pair of my sweat pants, gone out to the living room where last night's papers were still strewn around, and spent about twenty minutes shuffling things around, trying to decide what our productive lead for the day was. Then she came back and snuggled under the covers again after returning to woman-scented nakedness. At nine-thirty it was my turn. I looked at my yellow pad from yesterday-- do we drive out to Renton and try to convince them to let us see the boy? Try to track down Vijay Pandhu?

Something reminded me that it was a Saturday morning, a sunny, beautiful Saturday morning, and there was a beautiful naked woman, with whom I was very much in love, in my bed. I'd had enough sex for one twelve-hour period, but I wanted to feel the sun glowing through closed eyelids, warm on one cheek as I lay the other on her belly. I got off the couch, turned off the coffeemaker as I went back to the bedroom, and did just that.

We're both so far down the food chain of social animals by this point that neither of us really remembers exactly what it is we like doing, and we spent most of Saturday

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morning sitting on my couch looking through the weekend paper, casually suggesting things to each other. A couple of art shows, a small jazz festival-- wait, we do remember that neither of us like jazz--trying to decide which repertory theaters looked from their ads like they had air conditioning as mine finally lost its brave battle about eleven o'clock.

"Art," I concluded. "Galleries always have air conditioning."

"Mulder, do you know where any of these places are?"

"Yeah, I think I went there once." I pointed over the top of the section she was holding. "But that was a while ago, I think it was 1990, it might not be the same place, or it might have moved, or burned down, or..." Scully started to laugh.

"Next goat-sucking monster we meet, let's ask him what normal goat-sucking monsters do on a Saturday afternoon."

"I'm pretty sure you can get a ticket for goat-sucking on Saturdays unless you've got a permit."

"We've got badges, Mulder."

Watching Scully give in has become one of my favorite pastimes. Not giving in to me, that's too easy. It's the moments in which she gives in to herself, looking at a beaded anklet which would never go with any of her suits, or laughing at a thong-clad juggler on a unicycle as we wander through the street market. Pointing at things without the look that she's drawing a cold crosshairs on them. She bites her lip as part of nearly every emotion and moves quicker, less precisely. She likes oranges, things she can eat with her hands, things that are sickly sweet.

* * *

My apartment waited for me Sunday evening, tapping one subdued, homey foot. I wondered how it smelled-- but one of cancer's lingering gifts to me was an almost total deadening of my olfactory nerves, a severe limitation to two out of five senses. There are, I suppose, worse things that can happen to a pathologist, especially one with a sweet tooth and tendency to get big in the hips. I knew how I would smell-- womanly only in nature, with scentless, neutral man-soap and man-shampoo

replacing artificial femininity. I wondered how I smelled yesterday evening, in Mulder's t-shirt and a pair of old scrubs. Wine and sweat, curry and shrimp and two bouts of lovemaking in sixteen hours, pleasantly fouled. Ninety-four degrees and humid, Mulder had created a web of unreality with ice and 7-Up and ludicrously cheap Bulgarian red, his CD player swapping The Band and BB King, Mulder's "old-guy music." It felt like the misspent college life I'd never had, and I told Mulder so after I'd had a half-gallon or so of medically recommended fluid replacement.

"So what are you taking?"

"Not medicine. I'm a doctor already. Something I don't know. History, maybe, archeology. Yeah. Archeology."

The room swam a little. We're both lightweight drinkers, out of practice.

"Master's?" he asked.

"Yeah, but not serious. I did serious. I want to stay in grad school forever, have them dedicate a cubicle to me when I die without ever getting a degree. You?"

"I'm in film school, film studies, whatever they call it."

"We'll be totally unemployable, Mulder."

"I'm a rich kid, remember? The New England Mulders. Trust fund baby."

"What about me? I don't want to work hard enough to get scholarships."

"You're hot. You'll work something out."

"I'll just find myself a rich kid and live at his place."

The world narrowed around us, the humid atmosphere closing us out of the bedroom first. Mulder brought the second bottle of wine, the last bottle of soda and the rest of the ice in an ice cream bucket. It's our bucket, I was reaching for that the first time we kissed. We needed the supplies, as the night would soon shut us out of the kitchen. Neil Young was the last disc before the stereo passed beyond our reach. I willed myself to remember-- the song about the hurricane, make love to that

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sometime. Eventually we were forced off the couch, into the center of the floor, and finally I lay directly on top of him.

"I don't have a car," he says. "Never got around to buying one. Besides, I look way cooler reading Proust on the bus."

"Maybe that's how I met you." Our speech is slowing, warm spaces stretching between our words. "On the bus." Mulder's breathing lifts and lowers me slowly.

"You kept looking at me, looking away, so I just started staring at you until you broke out laughing. You were tan, looked so alive. Freckles everywhere. You'd spent the summer digging somewhere." The floor has finally dropped away beneath him, and the warm night has drawn tight and opaque around us, morning as far away as the now-unreachable bucket of ice.

"I was on an island, in Greece. In the ocean. I stood on ground where people lived for five thousand years and raised goats and ate grapes and looked at the sea and fell in love and died." This last space between our phrases stretched out into sleep.

* * *

She dreamt of the sky again, felt cold dry air battering at her cheeks as she grinned with joy. Then she was on her back, her limbs leaden and her chest constricted, heart pounding. A vibration like continents grinding roared under her spine. It was illogical, inconsistent, and she woke herself to see if the weight was Mulder's arm across her in the too-warm darkness.

* * *

Skinner's face was grim, hard, brutal, directed to his desk, his papers, anything except the two agents in front of him who glanced at each other and at the chairs in front of the desk.

"When you were in Washington State, against orders may I add, you had some contact with a Sherry Tsang, an accident inspector with the Federal Aviation Administration?"

"Yes sir," Scully answered.

"Sherry Tsang is dead. She was shot in her home sometime after Wednesday. Seattle PD were calling it a bungled home invasion at first until they found out nothing was missing. I guess NSA showed up at the crime scene with a very good idea of what they were looking for. Agent Mulder, your name has been mentioned in connection with some documents in her apartment."

"She's dead?" Mulder fell into one chair, his face falling into his hands. "It's Krycek. It's fucking Krycek and whoever's running him," he mumbled. "Have you heard from Smokey lately?"

"These were classified documents, Agent Mulder. Documents that the NSA is calling stolen."

"Fuck the documents, fuck NSA." Mulder rose, hands on his hips. "This just became a murder investigation." Skinner showed no response.

"Seattle PD is perfectly capable of handling a murder investigation, Mulder, and they'll request our assistance if they need it. What do you know about these documents?"

"I don't know anything about that, sir." Mulder spat.

"I didn't think so," Skinner said, and began writing on a notepad. "You can return to duty now. Be available for questioning."

"Sir?" Scully said incredulously.

"I said you're dismissed, Agent Scully."

"What do you know?" Mulder growled at him, both hands slamming onto the top of Skinner's desk.

Unflinching, Skinner looked up at them for the first time. He held out the notepad for the younger man. Mulder took it. Skinner glanced over at the table by the wall. There was an ashtray on it, with a single cigarette butt. Scully moved close to read the note as Mulder nodded to Skinner.

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THEY'RE COMING IN ONE HOUR. GET OUT OF HERE.

* * *

I CAN SENSE YOUR LIES.

"Really," Pandhu replied out loud. It wasn't necessary, but he found it easier to control the conversations when he forced himself to order the words, construct the statements.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO GAIN?

"Since when do you ask the questions, my friend?" The room was small, and its occupant appeared to spend most of its time in meditation.

ON RARE OCCASIONS, YOUR MOTIVES ARE NOT TRANSPARENTLY OBVIOUS.

"You and the Consortium deserve each other, you know." Pandhu said with a hint of a smile as he looked into the huge dark eyes. The lack of reflection was disconcerting, as if someone had simply forgotten to draw the eyes in. It paralleled the creature's presence. Its voice was there, or nothing. There was no sense of being, no awareness of another mind. Pandhu knew this was something the Colonists cultivated to distinguish themselves from what they saw as repulsive psychic intertwining.

YOU CLAIM TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE. WE ADMIT TO SEEKING DOMINATION. I THOUGHT YOUR KIND MADE A VIRTUE OF HONESTY.

"Humankind considers anything a virtue that makes death seem one moment further away."

YOU HOPE TO TAKE THEIR SIDE.

"The ones the Consortium calls the rebels, you mean. If they only knew."

YOU'RE ALREADY IN CONTACT WITH THEM.

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"We are... aware of each other. I am aware that to put right what your group put asunder, very specialized knowledge will be required. Knowledge which might add to my unique perspective."

EVEN THE MUDMINDS WILL SEE YOU FOR THE ABOMINATION YOU ARE.

Mudminds, Pandhu recognized, was the Colonists' term to describe the 'rebels.'

"Abomination? Such a strong word. What would the rest of your group think of your position now? Helpless, powerless, captive, yet still alive? I thought your kind made a virtue of honor." It was a fascinating experiment. There were a few items on a low bench on one side of the room. Among them, the silver device, the weapon the Colonists used against each other, lay untouched. It moved occasionally between Pandhu's visits, as if the room's occupant had picked it up and contemplated it.

WHEN I CHOOSE TO DEPART, I WILL HAVE THE DECENCY TO RETURN UNAWARE OF MY PREVIOUS FAILURES.

"Then you may be doomed to repeat them."

The creature's presence was gone; it turned its head away, looking at the blank wall opposite. It desired to be alone.

* * *

Outside the King Edward
Washington, DC
1:14 PM

Jeffrey Spender.
Jeffty Fucking Spudner.

It was pretty much the worst possible combination, Krycek thought as he hammered his last clip in, trying to figure out a good way to look nonchalant while getting off a fire escape. Some God who considered himself a real funny asshole had given Jeffy Spender the looks and general demeanor of a weasel, a heaping helping of the wrong kind of smarts and then, just for laughs, a set of balls that had been redirected from the production line where they made brass Clydesdales.

He'd just been pasting Spender's story about Scully driving out to Virginia for a consult involving a French national onto something Pandhu had said to Smokey earlier and zoned out for no more than half a second when he heard Spender say:

"By the way Krycek, if you don't want a leg to go with that arm I'd suggest staying real cool and taking your piece out."

There are a lot of people, something has to happen, some random factor. He took his gun out, holding both hands up in the air. Spender will lose it as soon as somebody screams, Krycek thought. He looked through the window behind Spender and saw fucking Skinner and two other agents piling out of a Crown Vic.

Krycek smelled the fruity scent of the waitress's hair gel behind him, and decided to make his own luck. BANG drowned out the sound of the waitress gasping through the hole in her shoulder from Krycek's upraised gun as he threw himself sideways, trying to rise and oh SHIT Spender is fucking COOL, he didn't even BLINK and he pulled the gun out from under the table, didn't just reflex-pull when Krycek fired.

Krycek spun himself behind the waitress, dragging her up as she sobbed and tried to fall. He blew another shot into the couch right behind Spender as Spender rolled out into the aisle. Krycek backpedalled, dragging the shrieking girl with him, her blood slippery on his plastic arm.

"Everybody down! FBI!" Spender roared in a voice Krycek had no fucking idea lived anywhere in the little weasel. The idiots in the aisle were throwing themselves out of their booths, helping Krycek, fucking up Spender's shot. The waitress was starting to pass out, getting heavy.

"Agent Spender!" Skinner yelled from the doorway.

"On your right! Gun!" Spender yelled, literally climbing over two guys who'd thrown themselves and their chicken wings on the floor. Krycek spun, heading down the aisle towards the kitchen and the cans and snapping one shot off at head height towards Spender, then one towards the door just to fuck things up.

"Let her go, Krycek!" Skinner, he thought. He banged through the kitchen door, kept backing into the storage in the back. He knew from checking out the place weeks ago that there was a door back here, but where... Then he saw it, surrounded by empty

s o k o l

blue plastic racks. The girl faded on him, dead weight dragging, and he dropped her just before the corner so Spender or whoever came first would have to stop and see to her.

The back door moved as he ran toward it and Krycek blew three rounds into the wood, heard someone scream "FUCK!"

Please god let this open OUT...

Krycek flew through the door, hearing a grunt from behind it and spinning, running backwards. One gray suit was down behind the door, blood on his sleeve, and he fired at the other, getting lucky and clipping him top of the thigh, under the vest . Something snicked past Krycek's shoulder and he felt brick splinters spatter on him as he turned to run.

Then there was a gray flicker stooping quickly out the open door. It was Jeffrey G-Man Spender pounding after him like a bat out of fucking hell. Shoot or run, Krycek decided he was already turning and went with the latter, bailing down the alley. There was an almighty SMACK on his fake arm as the BANG from Spender's gun lapped the brick walls. Krycek let the impact and his arm flying out in front spin him around and pirouetted while moving, snapping two rounds at Spender behind him, ziggling out onto the sidewalk out of the alley and getting lucky on the traffic as he ran across the street. He ran down one block, staying low, into another alley, thanking some local kid for pulling down a fire escape.

A metro police squad car turned down Krycek's alley as the howl of sirens dispersed themselves into individual telltales whining down between buildings. It crawled forward, the cops inside scanning the doorways and dumpsters. He hung on the escape, trying to scrunch himself into a corner, find any goddamn cover at all...

Chance time, Alex, he thought. Good thing you stopped at the second floor.

Krycek swung out, off the fire escape. His feet slammed HARD-- jesus good thing I wore my motorcycle boots-- onto the hood of the cruiser and he dropped two caps through the windshield, into the driver's chest. Fortunately, he slumped, holding the brake down as the motor idled.

"Get out of the car!" he screamed at the cop in the passenger seat. He's gonna stall if I

s o k o l

make him do it himself, Krycek thought as the young guy stepped out slowly. "Turn around!" The cop complied. Krycek hammered him in the base of the skull with his trashed plastic arm and he fell forward, moaning once. Lifting the man's gun as he rolled him over, Krycek literally ripped the shirt off him. He didn't need the buttons anyway, throwing his leather into the front seat. Searching quickly, he saw the unconscious cop's hat in the car. After slipping the shirt over his black tee and shoving the tails into his belt, Krycek clambered in, shoving the driver's dead body out and wincing at the mess he was about to lean back against. Pulling the hat as low as he could, he let the car creep forward, out of the alley.

Just let me get a couple of blocks, he thought. Don't make eye contact with cops, people. Don't look at the windshield.

No one did.

* * *

Fox Mulder's Apartment
2:47 PM

"Marty? It's Whiz. Listen, I got that press kit ready, if you guys want to come by the Core and pick it up, I'll be here for the soundcheck around four."

"Was your life as Marty more exciting than I'd ever imagined, Mulder?" He didn't respond, but rewound the message and played it again. She looked around the apartment casually. Video surveillance? Audio? Was there a team on the way right now? Scully definitely recognized the voice this time-- it was Langly. Mulder held up his hand as she started to speak, glanced up at the ceiling, then at the window. She ducked down the hallway, into the bathroom, and Mulder heard the shower starting as she called out to him.

"Are you going to just stand there and listen to wrong numbers all day, G-man?" He met her just inside the bathroom door.

They had run from Skinner's office, spent ten minutes in the basement gathering files. Splitting up, meeting at a Hertz, getting another car.

Her voice dropped to a throaty whisper. "Was that Langly?"

"Yeah. Something's got to be wrong there too."

They'd gone to a movie, crazily enough. No one would expect them there. They should be trying to get on a plane, keeping Scully's promise to drive out to Renton, doing something that people in trouble are supposed to do. So they spent two hours at a matinee, watching an asteroid threaten the earth. Mulder chuckled in the wrong places, and Scully tried to ignore the gigantic buzz that sat in the front of her mind, like a misfired headache. Mulder insisted that they had to get to his apartment.

"Does he really have something for you?"

"He must, we've got other signals if they just have to go underground." Scully leaned her head sideways against the cool wall of the bathroom, eyes briefly distant.

"This is getting bad fast, Mulder." When she returned her focus to him, she saw him glancing through the open door into the hallway. His mouth started the first syllable of her name, cut off by the tips of her fingers.

"No," she stopped him. "Whatever Langly has, we're going together."

There was a sharp CLACK from the front of the apartment and a ringing metallic sound over the hiss of the shower. Scully felt the body-warm metal of her sidearm against her cheek, realizing she had drawn it without thinking. Mulder, his gun drawn as well, was looking in the mirror, which gave a slight angled view of the living room. There was a shuffling sound down the hall, a floorboard creak from the entryway. Scully glanced into the mirror. Mulder saw her, and nodded. She stayed low, swinging around, crouching half behind the doorframe, aiming down the hall into the living room.

In the yawning, latent microsecond it took for the rounds to fly, Scully saw that the woman was quite good-looking, even beautiful. Tall, brunette, much younger than she, broad-shouldered and heavy-breasted, wearing fashionable sunglasses and a fashionable suit and carrying a fashionable machine pistol one-handed. The woman's slightly daring blouse puffed under her collarbone as one of their bullets slammed into her, and the lapel of her suit shifted as another tore into her belly. There was a thump and a clatter as she fell backwards, sitting down hard against the

far wall, her gun skittering across the hardwood. The man had been caught with his momentum forward, and looked over at his fallen partner, stumbling to stop moving forward as Scully tried to scream

"Free-"

It was a soldier's body, thick and broad, short hair, suit too tight, and he turned with his weapon raised. Mulder's bullet tore through the side of his throat and he sagged to his knees. Scully heard her partner running into his bedroom, heard things hitting the floor. Scully ran forward. The man was dead; his neck was open and ruined and no breath rasped out. The brunette shifted against the wall. There was a stain on the paint behind her, the splatter from an exit wound and a gory smear where she had shifted. She reached up to her face, straightening her sunglasses, head lolling up towards Scully. She raised one hand, holding up a finger-gun.

"Bang," she whispered, then winced, and her hand struck the floor heavily as her face turned down again.

Mulder came out of the bedroom with a shoebox.

"Scully... we have to move..." Dana steeled herself, patting the woman on the hips, then on her chest. She felt something bulge in a breast pocket and reached in, pulled out a set of car keys on a numbered tag. The young woman's chest was still, and her blood was on Scully's knuckles when she pulled them away. She held up the keys as they jogged out into the hallway.

"They might have called in our cars." Her voice sounded gasping, out of breath, at least to her. Mulder ran back to lock the door behind them, and pointed to the stairwell door at the other end of the hall. A door across the way opened, an elderly head poking out.

"The police are coming!" Mulder shouted. "Stay inside!" The head turtled back in, door slamming obediently.

"This is really gonna fuck up my lease..." he said as they started down the stairwell. "I left the shower running, too."

Scully felt a vibration against her hip, and Mulder's phone rang at the same time.

Glancing at him, Scully took her phone out and dropped it between the flights down to the basement. Her partner did the same. The rush of fear and necessity was wearing off, and she felt loose and weak from the neck down.

We just killed two people, Dana thought. No badges, no arrests, no warnings. She had a gun and I had a gun and I saw her first.

There was a bounce and a crack as their cells hit concrete and stopped ringing.

* * *

The Core Nightclub
Washington, DC
4:15 PM

Mulder's hand has slipped lower on the bare skin of my back, fingers gliding slightly under the waistband of his ratty cutoffs. We'd improvised on the clothes. I let him do it for now, to calm him down. He and the doorman, who'd been overt in his appreciation of certain of my secondary sexual characteristics, had spent four seconds silently ratcheting up the testosterone to a point where I was afraid someone was going to pee on a fire hydrant.

The reason clubs are dark, apparently, is that they are inevitably dumps which require shadow and alcohol to look like some place where you'd honestly consider speaking to a stranger. Mulder scans the space quickly, probably imagining it in full swing. Langly's voice booms out of the scuffed monoliths at each side of the stage.

"I'll be right back, people, time for me to attend to my own career... five minutes."

THE MANTS-- Half Man, Half Ant, All Asshole-- sprawls over Nashville Pussy on top of Drive Like Jehu in a palimpsest of magic-marker boasting on the huge concrete pillar in the center of the floor. Tonight, if I haven't forgotten what day it is, the posters declare Citizens of Gravity, with special guests Kittens and Local Heroes, Retard Nation and Feed Bag.

Langly's hair is gone; he has a thin buzz of pale blonde on a thinly sculpted head. His smile is broad, cold and fake.

"Marty! How ya doin', man?" He throws his arm around Mulder's shoulder. Mulder

quickly falls into the act.

"I'm okay, Whiz. What's up?"

"Come on, let's sit down." Langly, or Whiz, motions us to one of the tiny ragged tables that surround the large open space in front of the stage. They're bolted down, of course. I notice that Langly has three rings in one ear, two in the other, and the piercings look red and new. "We finally got those press kits done." I perch on the edge of the table, as neither Mulder nor Langly actually sit. "I thought maybe if you guys were heading out west you might want to show these around a little." He hands Mulder a thick white envelope.

"We got all the stuff on disk, too, the sound clips and everything." Langly glances back at the stage, the Citizens of Gravity, or perhaps Kittens, making an unpleasant noise that carried threats of growing up to be a deranged howl. "I gotta get back to work here, man. Soundcheck. Good seeing you." His eyes do not come back to Mulder's at all.

"Um, yeah, we should get together some time," Mulder says, waving one hand lamely, trying to establish some sort of connection.

"Yeah, cool. I gotta go."

"Take care," Mulder says to Langly.

"Yeah, I guess I will. See you around."

He calls for the kick drum, thump-thump-thump-PPP with reverb as the hulking doorman watches my butt go down the stairs. Mulder is silent, dark, tossing the thick package in one hand, catching the long side, then the short side, then the other long side.

* * *

As he walked down the hall of the apartment block, the smoker wondered what the neighbors must think. He imagined that living on the same floor as Fox Mulder had to be trying at best.

"Who's in charge here?" he asked the patrolman at the door.

"Lieutenant Grieves, over there, sir."

"Thank you." The photographer looked up at him, smelling cigarette smoke, and decided against saying anything. Authority hung off his shoulders like a mantle of invisible velvet. He stepped carefully over a smear of blood, and led the officer that the patrolman at the door had indicated into the hallway off the living room.

"Lieutenant, I'm going to ask you a few questions and then I'm going to have to ask you and your men to leave."

"On whose authority?"

The smoker didn't even remember what the name on the identification was, but it did say 'National Security Agency' and looked very impressive.

"This is a national security matter, Lieutenant. My team will be here shortly to take care of this." Grieves turned back towards the living room.

"Pack it up everybody. We've just been informed this is a federal matter." He glanced back at the smoker, then turned to his men again. "Leave everything here. Let's roll."

"Okay, you had some questions?" The new cigarette, the lighting of it, didn't draw any unusual attention from the cop.

"Did anyone see the shooters?"

"I'm guessing you know the resident is one Fox William Mulder, Special Agent, FBI? Or so they tell us?" The smoker nodded. "Well, man down the hall in 48, name's Willem Krystof, made Mulder and a red-haired woman, about five-two, leaving the apartment carrying sidearms after he heard the shots. Matches the description of Mulder's FBI partner, one Dana Scully. We're pegging them as the shooters right now, but we wanted to clear with the Bureau before we issued warrants."

"And these two?" He gestured with his cigarette at the dead bodies.

"Nothing, no IDs, haven't run pictures or prints yet. We're guessing pros, or..."

something that you guys would probably be interested in."

"Have you spoken to anyone at the Bureau?"

"Just the usual channels, they haven't had anyone down here."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. If this becomes a matter in your jurisdiction, we will be in touch."

"I hope not," Grieves said, pulling out his cell phone and walking towards the doorway. "I hate this kind of shit."

As the police packed their equipment, the smoker looked down at the bodies. The woman he had seen around, the man he didn't know. They had to be the Englishman's people, her with her expensive sunglasses and her expensive gun. It was his sort of foolishness, to think he would somehow 'ensure' that the job was done right.

The smoker knelt.

Who was it, he wondered as he looked up into Mulder's hallway. They had fired from there. Perhaps they had been in the bedroom. Agent Scully would have pulled the trigger first, of that he was certain. Her instincts that way were stronger. Skinner and Mulder had both had their chance and never taken it. He was sure that Scully would shoot him without a second thought.

The smoker stood and walked over to the front door, closing it. The apartment was empty now, and he picked up Mulder's phone.

"I need to speak to him, please." Puff, a long one, saving up. He heard his old colleague begin to speak. "I'm at Mulder's apartment. You should hire better people." The Englishman's aged righteousness crackled back at him.

"You are letting the immediacy of the situation interfere with your judgment." Puff while the other fumbled, then the smoker cut him off.

"I will take care of Mulder and Scully. You've made my work difficult enough already with the incompetence of your subordinates."

There was a knock at the door as the smoker's people arrived to remove the fallen. He hung up the phone, smiling thinly. The Englishman-- Keith, take his name-- was back on his heels. As were the others, reacting, trying to head off multiple threats at once. Expecting him to be a dutiful assassin, to fall in line.

"There's your break, Agent Mulder."

* * *

FBI Headquarters
Office of the Deputy Director
4:35PM

"Walter, I'm gonna do what I can. With Agent Spender's statement this angle about why you felt you couldn't plan this operation through normal channels might do something." Spender watched Skinner studying the carpet as Deputy Director Dean Schoen gently rearranged the coals under the AD's ass. One, there was a dead patron in the bar, origin of bullet unknown, but one of the agents Skinner had brought along had fired at least two rounds in the building in addition to Krycek's bullets. Two, there was a dead Metro cop, shooter matching Krycek's description. Three, one of Mulder's contacts was dead in Seattle with a possible sighting of Krycek and a very pissed NSA. Four, no Krycek. Five? Spender just lumped two dead pros in Mulder's apartment, a wounded agent, a wounded waitress, and a colossal public fuckup under Number Five: a gigantic ball of shit steadily gaining steam.

On the good side, as far as the Bureau was concerned, they had a convenient AD Skinner to dump everything on. In addition to having gone cowboy on the totally off-the-books operation that produced the disaster downtown a few hours ago, he could also be used as a target for all the shit that flew out of the giant rolling mass that was gaining on Fox Mulder and Dana Scully.

Who, of course, had found this an opportune moment to elope or something. Spender's mind whirled. He'd stood in the middle of the street, hands on hips, swearing to himself as the police tried to block traffic and sort out who'd been shooting at whom. Spender figured he could have walked out of their confused cordon with his gun in his hand. Which was probably more or less what Krycek did, he'd thought at the time, before he heard about the police cruiser.

"Walter, I'm suspending you from your desk duties and rank, effective immediately. I'm going to hold the District off but they may be pushing for charges. The only reason I'm not taking your badge and your gun right now is because I want this Krycek or whoever he is, and Mulder and Scully in DC and under control. There are a LOT of people who want to talk to them right now." DD Schoen looked at Skinner meaningfully. "This is all coming back to this X-Files operation, Walter."

"Understood, sir."

"Spender, you're suspended with pay for three days. This is to facilitate the investigation. Make yourself available; there won't be a reprimand on your record if you cooperate." The DD didn't even really look at him as he said it. Spender spoke up, feeling his face flush.

"Sir, we had him. I had Krycek this far from me. He can't have gone far."

"Oh, I am very aware of that, Agent Spender. You're both dismissed for now, but consider yourselves on call. And one more thing, Skinner."

"Sir?"

"Mulder and Scully are your people. Off the record, Walter, Spender, they are on some very exclusive wanted lists. If we don't find them first..."

"Thank you, sir."

* * *

Mulder couldn't ignore the handpainted sign in the window of what looked like a good place to get lost for a couple of hours. SIMPLY I AM THE KING OF THE BEST HOMEMADE DONAIR KEBAB SANDWICH. How do you put that in the white pages, he thought. S for Simply? Or in the yellow under Donair? The fluorescent lights were not yet on for the evening, and the old-style glass cabinets and assortment of travel posters of Lebanon made the place look slightly appealing. They took one of the tables, a block of formica with mismatching benches, and Mulder began scratching at the flap of Langly's "press kit." Scully started as a young man appeared beside the table.

"Just coffee, please," she said.

Mulder added some kind of murmur to her order.

"Three dollar each, no coffee only." He probably wasn't the King. Mulder flipped a twenty dollar bill at him, and the King's servant helpfully pissed off. Scully picked up the first ream of papers to come out of the envelope. It was a long strip of computer printout, twenty or thirty pages still folded together from a high-speed dot printer.

"I think Frohike gave us a summary at the beginning of this." Scully scanned the first few pages of something that looked extremely technical.

"There's a couple more disks in here, too." Mulder glanced at a handwritten note that fluttered out, leaving the envelope empty. He flipped it up between two fingers for Scully to read.

"HEAT ON. GOING TO GROUND. TAKE CARE.
-F"

Scully glanced over Mulder's shoulder at the door as if Frohike's "heat" would suddenly appear, then returned to the printout.

"This is what they got from Twelver, apparently. It looks like he broke down what were supposedly telemetry transmissions associated with the crashes-the one we witnessed and the one we were given the information about. According to this he couldn't isolate the ground station the capsule was communicating with. He claims it's consistent with similar transmissions from early Soviet spacecraft. The transmissions were identical." She turned the page, then another, referring back to the summary. "This is strange, Mulder... In each case there's a second transmission that appears to be going to the craft."

"I didn't give them any data like that from the crash we were at. I didn't have any."

"I know... it says here that Twelver had received that data from another source... as well as another identical transmission from an earlier event. It says here that there was a report of a similar crash off Vancouver Island eleven days before the first one

we knew about. That would make ours the third."

"So logic would dictate that there's going to be another. It's recurring, Scully, like almost all hauntings. It's even periodic, Scully, every eleven days. And how long was the flight, on the video? Eleven days."

"Logic dictates there's no such thing as a haunting, Mulder. And none of the literature you came up with, even you admit, shows anything close to a material component like what we've seen."

"Have you got a logical theory, Scully?"

"Yes, we're being set up. Seriously. By Alex Krycek and God only knows who else, probably with the aim of getting us killed. And you can't deny that, Mulder."

"Scully, whether or not Krycek is playing some kind of game with us there's just too much evidence. There's some kind of major unexplained phenomena. It's bigger than just whether or not we're working on the X-Files."

"Even if that's true, Mulder, someone is very determined that we not investigate it."

"When has that stopped us before?"

"Jesus, Mulder! A week ago you were hanging back on this because it was too easy!"

"Scully, look at it!" He lowered his voice, but the Prince was busy slicing meat.

"Sherry Tsang is dead. There's two killers dead in my apartment. It's not that simple. Why set us up and then try to push us off? And what about Jared Keelor? Even if Krycek is playing with us, there is more than that going on here. Someone's playing against Krycek, too, and I want to know why."

Scully looked over his shoulder and straightened up. Mulder spun around quickly from the waist and just about knocked over a bowl of tabbouleh from a tray presented behind him.

"Twenty bucks is dinner easy, you start on this and I bring some donair and shawarma, okay?" the kid said. Mulder realized his hand was on his weapon, and casually withdrew it and faked a smile as they were presented with the King's

appetizer combo.

"Yeah, yeah, that's great, thanks..." Mulder hung his head, pressing his hands into his temples. "Scully..."

"I know, Mulder. Look..." She folded her hands in front of her, elbows on the table. "Mulder?" He looked up. "We have a couple of options right now. One, we get in touch with Skinner and put ourselves under FBI protection."

"No. We're sitting ducks that way, and whatever is going on here, really, in the big picture will keep developing. This is different, Scully. Someone is actually gunning for us. How much protection do you think the FBI will give us from Cancerman, or the Pentagon?"

"Okay, two, we try and lie low on our own for a few days and figure out who's after us and for how long. Maybe this is temporary."

"What if we find out by car bomb?"

"Fine, Mulder. You have a better idea?"

"Scully? I think we should try one more thing. Just hear me out here."

"I'm listening."

"We should go to Renton... follow up your lead there. That's the part that doesn't fit. Everything else points straight back to an official coverup, or back to Krycek." Mulder picked up a wedge of pita bread and pulled it into two pieces, studying it. "And it doesn't make sense, Scully. I don't think Krycek's working for them. Not whoever sent those two to my apartment. This case, the Vostok, it's tying it all together somehow but... someone wants us on this, and someone else doesn't."

Scully felt her anger ebbing. He was thinking, not just chasing, not blinded by the pursuit. "Whoever, or whatever, was behind that boy's story wanted us. I want to try to find out why... that's the best way of getting whoever is on our back, whoever killed Sherry Tsang, off. Let's eat, wait till the traffic calms down, and then get out to Renton. If we find out what's happening there, it might be important enough to give us some leverage."

It was nearly an hour later when Scully said they should probably start moving. As they walked out of the shop, Mulder stopped just outside the door.

"I don't know about King," he said, "but that was a damn good donair." He looked up, studying the evening sky. "Scully, how bad do you think this is?"

"On a one to ten, I'd say about an eight point five?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Mulder, not now..."

"Scully. I mean this. I'll show you when we get there. This is something there might be no going back from."

"Mulder..." She moved in close, her hand reaching up to his temple and slipping into his hair. His face was still as she watched his eyes filled with something she could not define but knew somehow signified her as surely as a name. His hands settled on her hips, and they took a moment to themselves on the sidewalk. "I made that decision already..."

* * *

Kwik-It Postal Services
Washington, DC
6:45PM

Mulder walked up to the PO boxes, picking one in the middle of the rack. He unlocked it, sorted through a few envelopes including one large, padded one, stopped as if thinking about it, and cleaned the box out completely. We left, and that was it.

It wasn't one of the moments you would imagine as being eternal, as being defining, as a tremendous spike in the wave of your life.

I didn't realize this was the moment when we crossed over, when we in a sense truly became ourselves.

* * *

"Hey Danny, how you doing?" he began. I watched, leaning against the car while pretending to fidget in a purse that contained a Sig. Mulder leaned into the phone booth. I'm looking out. My man is making a deal while I cover his back.

Yep. Definitely losing my mind.

We'd thrown together what we had between two overnight bags and the office before we went to the club, to try and look a little less like narcs. Mulder had a black t-shirt and jeans, I'd been forced to improvise with a blouse, a black sports bra, and a pair of cutoffs Mulder used for basketball.

We certainly didn't look like narcs, anyway. But even with ninety-four degrees plus humidity I wasn't used to feeling quite this much breeze.

"Yeah, things are a little fucked up, it's temporary. How's that T-bird running, anyway? Yeah, that's what I mean, is that still on? No, don't tell me, is it still cool? Okay, thanks, man, I'll see you around. Yeah, you take care too."

I'd tried not to goggle when we pulled the car over and Mulder started checking the dozen or so envelopes. I knew Mulder had money, both from before his father died and especially since. I knew that if he cashed in or sold everything that it would probably slip over seven figures into some number which is more or less meaningless to a woman whose main financial choice of the past five years was to not buy a new car so she could keep her wardrobe up.

Nothing really prepared me for the leap between not feeling as guilty when he buys dinner all the time and seeing him checking through 'around a hundred and thirty thousand' dollars in cash the way Ahab would go through the five hundred we would take on vacation. There were other envelopes, too, five or six of them, the padded kind you use for shipping. He didn't discuss them, just shoved them into his overnight bag.

I have an idea what this is already; Mulder's paranoia is anything but fatalistic. It starts with the revolver on his ankle and extends from there, I know, to a web of schemes with the Gunmen and a variety of other contingencies hidden, cached,

planned. He says it's his inner Jew; you never know when they might come for you. When I still had a car, the moment I was back on the job after my abduction, he carefully taped a ziploc'ed revolver like his, two reloads, and a stack of twenties under the carpet in the trunk, two boxcutters inside the trunk itself, and another in the back seat. I knew this would be some version of the same, something planned for when dark imagination failed everyone but him.

* * *

Kelly's Bar
Washington, DC
5:54 PM

"There's one thing I still don't understand," Spender said as the waitress set his club sandwich down. Skinner raised an eyebrow.

"If Krycek is working for some kind of shadow agency or the NSA, why did he shoot his way out of there instead of just letting us take him in and then having them spring him? He's gotta be either freelancing or working for somebody else."

Skinner looked into the bottom of his glass. He'd ordered a triple bourbon and a beer chaser. Spender, not quite certain of the protocol in such situations, had decided to join him. After Schoen had finished with them, Skinner had stood out in the hallway for well over a minute, silent, staring through the opposite wall, then said he was going to go get something to eat.

"You're right." The older man killed half the bourbon in one shot, holding the glass up. Spender could see Skinner setting up his office, mentally, over the drinks and the sandwiches.

"Agent Spender, if nothing happens to change the circumstances here, I'm finished. I am going to take the fall for this. I might anyway. Regardless of whether I was in the right or not, I made serious miscalculations that killed people."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying you were following orders. This whole operation to snatch Krycek was mine. Give it a few days, go play some golf. Then, if nothing else has come up, go back to Schoen and tell them everything."

"Sir, with all due respect, no way."

"Save your ass, Spender. I'm got enough martyrs to deal with."

"Sir, I fucked up. I believed Krycek, I went behind your back, I spied on FBI personnel for who the hell knows who. It's probably my fault that woman in Seattle is dead. Mulder and Scully have professional killers after them, probably including that psycho fuck Krycek."

"Spender..."

"Sir, if this doesn't get straightened out they can bust me right out of the Bureau. I don't care. If this is how things work I don't want to play. You tried to do the right thing. I'm trying to do the right thing now. Now what do you need me to do?"

"Eat your sandwich and tell me everything you told Krycek. What do you know about this case Mulder's onto...?"

* * *

DC Municipal Impound Yard

8:40 PM

They had pulled into a municipal impound lot well over on the east side, in a neighbourhood Scully imagined was best described as "industrial," or perhaps "post-apocalyptic." Mulder had told the patrolman on duty that he was a friend of Lucy's and flashed him a fifty. The cop swaggered over to the control shack and came back with a full sergeant, which struck her as a bit of extra rank for eight-forty on a Friday night.

"So can I help you folks?" the officer said around his toothpick.

"Yeah, we're just doing an audit here, you know?" Mulder flashed his badge, and Scully could see a small wad of bills rolled up on top of his shield. The sergeant inspected Mulder's ID, after a fashion.

"You need any questions answered, give me a holler..."

* * *

"Mulder, is this what it looks like?"

"What does it look like?" I answered.

"Like DC police selling impounded vehicles on the black market," Scully grumbled to me as we walked away from the two cops. I'd read a novel once, I don't remember who by, where these twins who thought they were just whispering to each other were actually telepaths and hadn't realized it. I'm reasonably sure Scully's lips had moved.

"Did that guy there say anything about selling me a car?"

"I'd say tell that to the judge, Mulder, but I'm afraid I wouldn't be kidding." She didn't leave, though, and began looking up and down the ranks of vehicles. She headed for the trucks. I'm not ashamed to say that, even as a man, I don't know a damn thing about cars beyond what I had to learn in the Academy. Gas goes in and they move.

"You sure we might not want to look at something less conspicuous?" It was a Suburban, and it looked vaguely like a shiny mammoth.

"Mulder, I have a feeling we might need the space," she said quietly. I looked in the back, and winked at her. She pretended to ignore me. "There's lots of room for the dogs..." she said fairly loudly.

"Pop the hood for me and look like you know what you're doing." Her voice dropped again. I fumbled uselessly at the door handle, then tried to walk casually over to where the two fine examples of DC police were watching us.

"You guys got keys for that Chevy over there?" They flipped me two keys on a piece of cotton string, with a numbered tag attached.

"Nine grand," one said. "It's a ninety-five. Six-point-two diesel, I think."

"Hey, honey, it's a six-point-two diesel," I said as I walked back to Scully.

"Yeah, I figured that part out," she said as she unlocked the door and hauled herself up into the driver's seat, cranking it as far forward as it would go. She brought it to life with a very truck-sounding roar, and leaned down to me, whispering again.

"We can go about 300 miles on one tank of fuel and sleep in it if we have to."

"And there's lots of room for the dogs," I replied, knocking on the door frame and heading back to the shelter at the front.

"I just need to call my bank, if that's cool with you?"

"Look, are you out of your..." I pulled out a stack of bills from inside my jacket.

"Relax, I'm just fuckin' with you guys." I cracked the tape and counted ten hundreds off the top, then dropped the rest. The senior one's toothpick dropped in consideration as he thumbed quickly through them. Non-sequential, unmarked, totally random.

"Always happy to see a satisfied customer," Toothpick said. "Would you be interested in our extended warranty plan?" He guffawed and smacked his partner on the shoulder as I walked away. Scully didn't look like she was going to be moved from the driver's seat, so I walked around to the other side of the truck and climbed in.

"Y'know honey," I said, looking over my shoulder into the back of the truck, "they even cleaned it up for us. I guess it's not true what they say about used car salesmen."

"Really, this is okay, Mulder," she said, ducking down to hunt for something, "of the five felony charges that could be laid against us based on the past twelve hours this one is by far the least serious. Ah, there we go." Scully found the button to raise the seat.

* * *

Department of Social Services
Renton, Virginia

10:50 PM

Tickle was waiting for them as they pulled up. There were a few lights on in the long, two-story building.

"You said Jared was still here?" Scully asked. They had called Tickle from a roadside phone, and Scully had told him that they believed the boy's life might be in danger. The officer might have made half a blink at our decidedly off-duty attire, but nothing more. Either Tickle was a very cool customer, Mulder thought, or there wasn't any sort of APB out on them.

"It's a typical bureaucratic fuckup. They can't send him home until the psych assessment is done, and the doc didn't make it out here today."

"Who's been staying with him?" Scully asked as they waited outside the front door.

"Well, Sharon..." Tickle peered through the glass. "She was gonna come let us in. Maybe Jared woke up or something. Hang on..." He started sorting through a large key ring. "I got a key here, it's a county building." Mulder's jaw twitched. It didn't escape the officer's notice, and he rummaged faster.

"Mulder, look!" Scully pointed inside. There was clearly an outstretched arm, a woman's, just visible down the hallway where Child Welfare services was located.

"Got it!" Tickle grunted, shoving the door open. They ran down the hallway, the cop leading. Mulder skidded to a halt by the woman's body. It was the social worker Scully had seen on Friday, lying on her back, eyes glassy. There was a horrific rent in her belly, and a trail of blood dragged from the playroom. Half her left cheek was pulled away, hanging in a bloody flap just above her chin.

"No way that was Krycek," Mulder said, and jogged to catch up.

"Jared!"

Tickle called out from the doorway as Scully stopped beside him. Her gun dropped limply at her side, and Mulder heard her gasp as the policeman ran into the room. He caught up, and the three of them stood stupidly in the doorway, Mulder looking over Scully's head.

There was so much blood...

The boy knelt in the middle of the carpet, beside the little table. There was a great spatter of blood from the center of the table, trailing onto the floor to where he was, then another great spill that turned into the trail the dying woman had carried into the hallway. Jared whined a steady note, his voice choking and catching, rocking back and forth. His head lifted. His eyes, oh my GOD Scully heard herself whimper, his eyes are gone...

Mulder held her, his hand snaking out to grab her wrist. Something told him, something that crawled down into his belly and balls like a frozen snake, not to let her go.

Tickle rushed forward as Jared raised his hands imploring and such skinny, little-boy's hands they were, slick with blood and so pale... then Mulder saw light and realised that the ribbons that hung from the boy's arms were not the remains of his pajamas, and that he reached out to Tickle with naked, raw, bloody bone held together by tendon and blood and somehow Mulder knew.

...hate...

"sssssooooo LOOOOOOOOOONNNNNNGGGGGG" Jared's little voice rose to a child's scream. The thin, ravaged remains of his hands plunged forward at Tickle and the big man cried out in time with the boy, trying to pull himself backwards as little bones punched into his belly, clutching and clawing at the life there. The man and the boy rocked back and forth together for a moment, their voices rising and falling in time with their motion, underpinned with the awful sound of the ruination of flesh.

Mulder's mind did not let him clearly remember, later, what he saw, but it seemed as if something tried to thrust itself out from Jared's face, bursting his poor little skull outwards in a shower of blood and fragments.

The sounds all stopped suddenly, except for the heavy, wet slump of Tickle's large body to the floor.

s o k o l

* * *

ete kholod, it's so cold...

I do not want to open my eyes because if it is this cold, I am on the dark side and there will be nothing to see. The blank of the earth will obscure even stars to remind me that I am as far from home as anyone has ever been. The nightmare aspect of it is gone, waking up and clenching my eyes closed so I could force myself into acceptance of the fact that I was still here, still in my little sphere.

The mist from my breath floats in the cabin, gradually congealing into large, fuzzy snowflakes that melt into vapour when I am on the sun side, just long enough to refreeze when I pass over into the dark. The switch I have built for the radio is just above my knee, I reach out and fumble the wires together with my gloves. The tiny red lights wink at me and they are worth ten degrees of warmth. I swallow twice, dryly, trying to bring some moisture to my throat so my voice will not be a rasp.

"Sokol zdyes, Sokol is here."

The radio murmurs in response, something I cannot quite understand. The first two days I wanted to stand. Now--six? Seven? How long was I asleep this time? I feel as if I have forgotten how to stand.

"Sokol zdyes, slushayu, I hear you, do you hear me?"

The murmur is louder this time, the transmission is a steady throb of something that is not static. Perhaps it is my ears, something with the pressure. But there is a voice, or many voices. I start, and release the wires without crimping them together. The voices do not stop, and it is not the radio, and I am very far from home and not at all alone.

* * *

Renton, Virginia
Tuesday, 2 June 1998
3:12 AM

The human body deeply dislikes being awake between two and five o'clock in the morning; the machine is programmed to accept that as the core time in which it

absolutely must sleep in order to keep functioning.

And besides, it's dark.

It would stand to reason, then, that only something of tremendous import can cause human activity at these hours.

And it's usually something bad, Spender thought as he stood out in the hallway staring blankly at his notepad. The cotton wool that had wrapped itself around his thoughts on the drive here hadn't dissipated; it had just turned into a dark, tangled nest of webs and dust complete with chittering spiders and dried husk-corpses entombed in ratty silk. He had stood in there, changing angles, running his hands through his hair in different combinations, until the coroner finished the pictures and the cops all started looking at each other as they realized that someone was going to have to separate the bodies on the floor. Everyone in the room knew that the mess of Tickle's guts would spill out on the floor in a ropy pile, and that the horrid ribbons of flesh on the boy's arms would dangle and perhaps brush someone who was close, and his poor ruined little head would probably just fall apart. And then, someone would have to pick it up.

Spender took refuge in horror-- mumbling "Who did this? Who did this?" to himself as he circled the gory mess. Then he stepped on a child's book, probably swept off the table, with only a little blood on it. *Where the Wild Things Are*. Oh, of course, the wild things did it, Spender thought. That explains everything. A sick chuckle burbled up through his clenched throat and he quickly brushed past the two cops in the doorway.

"What do you..." Skinner addressed him as he tried to get a grip on himself in the hallway. As he looked up, Skinner turned, breaking into a run down towards the front of the building. Spender dropped his notebook and started following as he saw another figure stop just by the empty reception desk, flashing an ID to the policeman there. The smoker looked up, seeing Skinner in almost a full run, and turned casually. The cop goggled as the big man grabbed at the lapels of the smoker's jacket. The smoker turned, almost slowly, ducking under Skinner's arms and spinning around once to come up behind the FBI man, facing him as he skidded to a stop.

The cop was clever enough to say "shit" when Skinner's gun came up. Then Spender, never one to be left out, drew his weapon and they all stood there, glaring at each

other.

"Mr. Skinner," the smoker began tiredly, "do we have to go through this bullshit every time?"

"What are you doing here?" Skinner lowered his gun. "What do you know about this? Where's Krycek?"

"Where are Mulder and Scully?" Spender mentally slapped himself, and decided to shut up and let the big boys sort this one out. Easier for all concerned if he played dumb right now.

"I'm looking for you, Mr. Skinner, and Agent Spender as well if he's determined to follow you." The smoker looked at the younger man for a moment, then back at Skinner. "I don't know where Alex Krycek is, nor do I know where Mulder and Scully are. They can't be far, it's been less than four hours since Mulder made the 911 call that brought us all here. I am, however, fairly certain I know where they're going."

"Washington... the crash." Spender said. Skinner moved closer to the smoker again, hands on hips.

"Is that what this is all about? That Russian spaceship?"

"You have no idea what this is all about. If Agent Mulder tries to go there, they will be killed. I can guarantee it. I've done what I can to keep them alive. Find them and keep them somewhere. I will try to contact you again."

"Why should I trust you?" Skinner growled.

"I'm the one who's supposed to kill them in the meantime. And besides, haven't I been right before?" He smiled thinly, and began the motions of tapping out a cigarette from the red and white pack.

"What's going on here?" Skinner asked, his voice raised, his big man's hands turned outwards at his sides. The smoker began to walk away into the dark, a match flaring.

"Everything."

* * *

She woke when his body twisted suddenly and he gasped, as if he were caught in a net and pulled somewhere where he couldn't breathe. His legs twisted in the motel sheets, pulling them away from her. She rolled around, before even coming fully awake, whisper-shushing in his ear and touching his shoulder, pressing herself against his side. Then recent memory came back to her as well, landing and settling its reality on her as consciousness strengthened.

"Bad dream." He blinked, swallowed. "Roche had you. I was in the office, and Samantha came to the door. She gave me a heart, one of Roche's hearts, made out of green silk, satin, from your pyjamas. I knew you were dead." Scully threw an arm and a leg over him, pushing her head under his chin.

"No one will take me." It was a new one for her, but only in the details. She had learned in only a few weeks of sharing beds with Mulder that she and Samantha were ghostly sisters in his nightmares, endlessly calling his name or bearing news of the other's fate.

"Somebody already has."

He'd told her once that nothing gave him nightmares, qualified that statement later, and then in the end it turned out he'd been lying all along.

"That was before."

Mulder's trembling stilled, and his arms eased around her. One came around her shoulder, holding her to him, the other reaching across his body so his hand rested on her thigh where it stretched over his hip, onto his belly.

"Time is it?" he mumbled. She raised her head, squinted across his chest at the motel's clock radio.

"Almost five." Settled her head back on his breast, her hands still but nervous. "I felt something there tonight. I've never run away before." She felt Mulder's body transmit an affirmative to her in the way they fitted together.

s o k o l

Flying down the hallway of the county building with her heart and her guts in her throat, Mulder clutching at her wrist, a prickling blanket of terror laid over them as the rank stench of torn bodies followed.

"I felt like I'd looked into Hell."

* * *

s o k o l

iv

e x e r c i s e o f w i l l

6:46 AM

He was sitting on the bed when she stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in a better robe than she would have expected for the motel. It was mildly comforting that there was at least a small part of her that wanted to forget everything and saunter up to him, pull her robe open and take his large hands in hers and run them over her clean, slightly damp body until she made his expression change from sleepy-boy into something very different.

Mulder was fiddling with one of the envelopes he had picked up yesterday afternoon. He started to say something, cut himself off, looked away from her. She walked up right in front of him, slipping herself between his knees as he sat on the edge of the bed with a sheet drawn around his waist. He looked up, and his expression did change, serious and wanting--the expression he wore when he needed her to understand. He pressed the envelope into her hands.

"Scully, I..." She tilted her head, inquiringly, rubbing her hand on his bare shoulder. "I love you, Scully."

She opened her mouth. It was hard to say, in some ways, the ultimate admission of human weakness when given without qualifications and said outside the humid shield of sex. He reached up, stroking the side of her face, fingertips in her wet hair. She kissed his thumb instead.

There was something slippery in the envelope, a plastic bag. Pulling it out, it was heavy, black plastic, rolled around what felt like a small, thick pamphlet and a little package.

"Mulder, what on earth..." She sat down slowly on the bed next to him. The plastic uncovered a wallet and a black, hand-size book. She flipped it over to look at the front cover. It was a Canadian passport, stamped with a crowned coat of arms in gold. She glanced up at Mulder and flipped to the second page, stiffened with plastic.

McMurdo, Tricia Joanne. Canadian. Date of Birth 7 Jul/ Jul 66. Place of Birth Antigonish Can.

The woman in the black and white picture could be mistaken for a few years younger than she was. She had red or dark blonde hair, clear redhead's skin, and large pale eyes. She was quite attractive, in a slightly reserved way.

She was Dana.

Scully pulled open the wallet--black, leather, a little mannish but more efficient than a pocketbook or purse. It looked worn. Money, about six hundred dollars in twenties and fifties and about a hundred in green and purple Canadian bills. Cards. A bank card, a Canadian bank, Tricia J. McMurdo. A Visa card, same bank, same woman who shared her face.

Plain white card with nine digits in black, Canadian social insurance. A library card for the Toronto Public Library system. A video store card. And then her again, a different, older picture, glasses and fifteen pounds heavier, on a driver's license from the province of Ontario. Tricia McMurdo has a fourteenth-floor apartment in Toronto. She pulled them out one after the other. Mulder's voice cracked slightly as he spoke.

"It's not all good. The passport's valid, so's the driver's license. The social insurance number, the vehicle registration in the back of the driver's, and the library card and

stuff are fake, they're for cover. The bank card and the credit card are real. There's about seven thousand US in the bank account. It's a savings account, you don't have checks. The address is real, but don't go there, it's a cover. The phone number's real, with a woman's voice on the answering machine. You can pick up messages from it."

"Mulder, where did all this come from?"

"I started it a while ago. Things have to have histories: credit cards, bank accounts. The guys do this as a sideline." He spoke quietly. "I guess there's CIA people, mobsters, who might need an out someday. Sometimes women who can't get away from someone."

"Who's Tricia McMurdo?"

"I don't know. No one. Just a name. I'm not saying we need to use this now, Scully. But after last night I'm kind of running out of ideas. I just think... maybe we should be prepared."

She didn't ask the obvious question in response.

"When did you start putting this together?"

"Ninety-six... after the desert. If anything happened to me I wanted you to have a way out if you wanted it. The guys were supposed to wait two weeks, less if it looked bad, and then tell you about it."

"You have all this too?" She put the passport down on top of the little pile of forgeries.

"Yeah. Mine's all here." The spirit of a frugal ancestor suddenly made Scully want to ask how much he had spent on this. This wasn't cheap, this was serious crime. All that time, everything that happened...

Her hand was back on his shoulder. She looked up at him.

"Was that if something happened to me?"

Mulder half-laughed, and he shook his head.

"If something happened to you. Right." He paused, his voice quieter. "There's a building, in DC, apparently the secret mountain hideout of the mighty Consortium, where they have meetings. Langly and Byers wouldn't have helped me, but Frohike would. It just would have been a matter of getting in the front door."

"What if a piano fell on me?" Scully rubbed his neck and tried to smile.

"I'd look really stupid walking into a moving company with an AK-47 and eighteen pounds of Semtex strapped to my chest." He leaned in against her, ducking to rest his chin on her shoulder. She nuzzled in a little closer, realizing that her smile had failed despite his joke. It wasn't a joke really, nor a surprise, she reminded herself. The violence in him was a narrow but terrifyingly deep streak, and so hard she was surprised it didn't show on an x-ray.

"Vodka," she whispered. "And... some borrowed, non-prescribed medication." There you are, Mulder, I've said it, she thought. Almost wasted your money. She watched Mulder look out between the curtains, trying to pretend she hadn't said what she did. You knew I'd die for you, that's easy for us, but die over you, like a poor little Capulet debutante? You didn't want to know that, did you.

People moved in the parking lot, getting an early start, urging the dog into the van.

"We have to stop doing this, Mulder. We need them back."

"Who?" he asked her.

"The people we were before."

"Do you think that's it, Scully? Before what? Before we... what? When was that, anyway?"

"I don't know. Maybe it is." Scully paused.

"Do you think you would go back, if you could? Back to before we..." he asked, his voice tentative.

"Oh, God, no. No." She rocked back and turned her head, pressing her cheek against his neck. "Why did you plan this? All along, you said that everything was in the X-Files, the answers would all be in there for everything, and all along you had this, you had plans for us to get away...?"

"Because I was sure that somehow, if it all went wrong, we would still be together."

* * *

Mulder is conscious now, still bleeding from his head and I can't feel my leg. They've set fire to the house and it won't be long now, I hear them singing their hymn upstairs. I'm slumping into his chest and his arms are around me and it's getting hard to breathe, the ceiling is going and I can feel the sparks and embers on my back. His voice is curling around me, coming through his chest and up through his throat, I feel it all the way up until his lips are in my hair. Scully, Scully, he says my name, and he says it will be all right and then the sun comes for us.

* * *

Federal Detention Center
Washington, DC
11:43 AM

"So what have they told you?" Skinner asked, straddling the chair backwards. He couldn't remember the last time he'd interrogated someone who didn't smoke. The last time he'd interrogated someone as an agent, he'd been wearing a polyester suit, possibly with tan shoes.

"Tax evasion, about 40 counts of fraud, twelve conspiracy to commit fraud, some customs stuff, possession of child pornography, there's probably more." John Byers leaned back in the chair. "I don't think they can make a lot of it stick, they won't have much admissible evidence. The story, which incidentally is true, is that we did some network security audits for a couple of front companies with Asian gang connections. That was all strictly above board, but the FBI is trying to intimidate us into giving access to our files under that pretext."

"Child pornography?" Skinner asked.

"The nuclear option." Byers smiled thinly. "No sympathy for perverts. We were running a news server on the service provider we had going. There was probably that kind of material on it somewhere, just like it would be on any commercial server, or on America Online, for that matter. As the carrier, we're not responsible. It'll never stand up in court."

"Why do they need to lean on you? They've got warrants for your computer systems, right?"

"That doesn't mean they can get anything out of them." Byers allowed a note of self-satisfaction to creep into his voice.

"Do you have material related to Mulder and Scully and the X-Files on there?"

"I'm not going to say one way or the other. They might have all our servers, they might not. If they change their minds about my bail I might be more helpful. I might not."

"Have they been asking you about Mulder?"

Byers shrugged.

"Look, John... they are in extreme danger," Skinner said. "We're trying to find them for their own safety. At least six people have died already."

"Then maybe they're better off not being found." Byers looked up at the fluorescent lights for a few seconds, then leaned forward with his arms on the table. "We all had exit strategies. Strange as it may sound, this is mine, more or less. In a few months I'll walk out cleared of all charges and I can go back to being John Byers, with my car lease, my magazine subscriptions, my apartment. And, most likely, a syndicated weekly Web column on privacy and electronic freedom issues. This part of the system works, Mr. Skinner. Langly, Frohike... the FBI, the NSA and IRS all working together will never find them in a decade if they don't want to be found, because that's what means the most to them. Being on the outside."

"What's Mulder's exit strategy? Where is he going to go, Byers?"

"What would he never give up?"

The younger man leaned back in the chair, and it was very clear that he had nothing more to say.

* * *

"Did you have any luck?"

Spender glanced up at Skinner in response, perching on the edge of a table in the hallway, flipping through a pair of printouts.

"Not really. Mr. Byers there will probably walk in three hours when the decision against granting him bail is overturned. He's squeaky clean thus far. The worst thing they honestly think they'll get him on is accessory to tax fraud. As for the others, we got "Ringo"

Langly, born 1965, questioned pretty much on a monthly basis for a variety of phone fraud and minor drug stuff from '84 to '91, when he drops off the face of the planet. Arrested on possession with intent to traffic in '89, case was thrown out and he won a harassment settlement against the Detroit PD for some serious money. Since then, he hasn't even had a card at a video store. And check this out--Thaddeus Melchior, aka Melvin, Frohike, born 1951, Cincinnati. US Army, served two tours in Vietnam as a corpsman, won himself a Bronze Star. Got out, bounced around the West Coast, got a couple of DUIs, and then he gets sent up for armed robbery in '79. Knocked over a bank in Oregon with two accomplices. Serves three years, model prisoner, paroled, and he pretty much fades. Ex-wife had him declared legally dead in California in '91, which is pretty funny because he held a business license in Maryland that year. Mr. Byers there is all legit, he's the front man."

Skinner snorted.

"Byers said nobody was going to find them."

"I think he's right," Spender said, offering Skinner the file. The older man waved it off.

They walked outside. Skinner looked around the parking lot. He'd forgotten what a

bitch it was to try and find your own BuCar when you didn't have your own executive parking space.

"So what do you think?" the older man asked.

"It would take months of sniffing to find these guys and get these files on them for a bunch of weak fraud charges, and then nobody moves on them until everybody's looking for Mulder? It's complete bullshit."

"Yeah, Jeff, that's definitely bullshit."

It was hot, damp, and Skinner was quite certain that he hadn't slept in twenty-four hours. As he went to the car he yanked at his tie, pulling it right off, and saw Spender gratefully doing the same.

"Okay, I see two options." Skinner started the car and waited for the rush of the air conditioning before shutting the door. "One, they're going to try to continue their investigation. Obviously it's important somehow. If they were in Renton last night they might have a better idea than we do what the hell is going on. There's definitely a lot of wheels in motion here." The big car drifted around the lanes of the parking lot, lining up with other federal employees getting out for lunch. "Two, they disappear like their friends here. They've never rabbitied before. Mulder's gone underground and Scully's lied to cover for him, but only to keep working, never just to take the heat off."

"Sir, was that before they..." Skinner actually smiled, and giddy fatigue was catching up with Spender as well.

"Agent Spender, the correct term is 'knocking boots'," Skinner replied. "And I honestly don't know. Those two, there's a lot of water under that bridge and I don't know how much of it I've really seen." Skinner took the car up the onramp onto the expressway. "You're thinking that they might just run, if they think they have something to lose besides an X-file."

"It's possible. I mean, Scully just about... just about died in Pennsylvania not even two months ago." The younger man paused, Skinner reminding himself that Spender's mother was still missing. "There's a hell of a lot to indicate that this is all one final play to get them out of the way, whatever it is they're in the way of. But we

don't know that Black Lung wasn't just jerking our chains last night, either."

"I can't just let them go, Jeff. On top of anything else, I don't want them out there alone."

* * *

United Airlines Flight 782
Washington, DC -- Seattle
Business Class

Eventually I drank enough rye so that the blonde stewardess' face stopped trying to peel off her skull in a bloody ruin every time I looked at her. I was ferociously drunk, twelve ounces drunk, but part of my brain stayed stubbornly sober, curled like a hooded snake and whispering to me. I had spent the night in a safe house, not Consortium, one from the bad old days. I didn't watch the news because I didn't want to know, but I walked right through the airport so I knew someone must have been looking after me by that point.

I'd already looked blearily out the window, wondering if Mulder was down there, and if so, if I could make a sizable chunk of the plane fall on him by hauling the emergency hatch open and decompressing us. Preferably while he was fucking Scully. Actually, with my luck it would miss them by ten feet, and I'd live, except that I'd probably lose two of my three legs this time.

Ahhh, third leg. I kill me, I thought, and marveled at how the stew managed to keep me busy with the ice. What a pro. Then the snake uncoiled again, wrapping around my bicep, or what was left of it. The smoker told me about it, mind-fucking bastard that he is. 'It feels so good to put my arms around you.' The smoker dared me to laugh, and I did. Not because I'm jealous of any of that sentimental bullshit. I've watched him and Scully fuck and while they're obviously the best each other has had, I've been better. It wasn't even the arm, so much, that kind of thing is an occupational hazard, it's that I now have a permanently implanted memory of frosty air and fallen leaves and campfire smoke and a bunch of Russian kids with a flensing knife hacking away at my arm while they kneel on top of me, and trying to break the bone, and trying to figure out how to get through the tendons, and then when I knew that I was ruined, at least it was over. Then one of them pulled a burning log out of the fire, and it wasn't quite over yet, and there were other things

to smell besides the leaves.

Yep, Mulder, you really fucked up autumn for me. That was almost as funny as my third-leg crack earlier, and certainly deserved a nice swig of whiskey. Capping Scully's sister sucked as well, though your dad did have a big, big spin of the karma wheel coming. Typical Mulder. Doesn't give a damn about something until realizes he's lost it, or almost lost it. That poor Kazakh kid was a fucking mess, I'm a lousy seamstress, though I guess that wasn't really your fault. Nor, I guess, is the fact that I am now privy to the whole demons-from-beyond-invading-Earth-and-fucking-shit-up thing which I wouldn't believe if I hadn't seen the backup viewer who'd managed to disprove the theory that you couldn't strangle yourself by shoving your own hand down your throat. That was, of course, after she'd managed to implant a notebook in her handler's skull to the extent that he wouldn't be using it anymore except as a planter.

Oooohhh, god damn am I funny.

This was not how it was supposed to work out. The difference between you and me, Mulder, is this was just my fucking job, Mulder, I didn't want to know. Now I'm the one running around with a head full of snakes and demons and black oil and who the fuck knows what and they just had a little job for me Mulder, just play partner with you for a few months, then make sure they get away clean with the redhead.

The stew's head was starting to split open again, and fortunately I still had two-thirds of the bottle left.

* * *

Wednesday, June 3, 1998

Washington, DC

9:40 AM

The phone rang in the sleek Jaguar sedan, "secure" light blinking. The Englishman had left standing instructions, explicit ones, that he would take only the most urgent calls in the car. That was for businessmen, merchants, men in a hurry for reasons of no consequence. He picked up the phone, irritated.

"Yes?"

"Sir, there's an urgent videoconference meeting at the Center."

"Concerning what?" He despised urgency. The urgency which required such things as videoconferencing was a product of the past two decades. It was not real urgency, merely impatience.

"There's been a serious exposure, sir, and there's a problem at the Embassy."

"Do you mean the Embassy in Nevada?"

"Yes, sir." He immediately replaced the phone.

"Driver, to the Center... immediately..."

* * *

"Very well, we can't wait any longer. The others will have to be briefed later." The fat man took his seat as the Englishman entered the dark-paneled room with the incongruous video displays mounted on a center table. There were three others: the smoker, the fat man, and another American, a man almost as old as the Englishman, who spoke rarely, but with impact. On one screen they could see Pandhu, and on another two other men currently in Seattle on that project. On a third was the Russian liaison, in the grim gray room of the Russian embassy that the KGB used to use. On the screens which intervened, one facing each chair, the face of a full Air Force colonel flickered in.

"We're ready then?" the disembodied soldier said. The picture flicked to a video feed, grainy colour, wriggly Farsi script across the bottom. "Iranian television broadcast these pictures late last night." The camera walked around what looked like some sort of fallen industrial building, grounded in a scrubby sand dune, then flipped to an helicopter view. Triangular in shape, with a dome structure in the center, a scar cut a hundred yards long in the brush where it had obviously ploughed in from the air at some speed. "As we can see, gentlemen, it's obviously a Colonist-tech craft. All of the American and British craft are accounted for, so we have to assume it's Colonist-crewed. It may have been attempting to reach the emergency landing site in Afghanistan. The Iranians were claiming as of this morning that it's a US spy satellite, but they are eventually going to get inside if they haven't already. We've got CNN and the BBC under control for the time being but

Russian, French, and Italian media are picking up the story."

The smoker looked at the older American, the quiet one. His jaw was clenched tight and his hand gripped the arm of his chair. He said nothing, of course. The smoker gave him a small, sympathetic smile.

The picture flipped again, with the legend "GROOM LAKE BASE" at the bottom of the screen. Figures in decontamination suits clustered around another craft, which crouched on its thick, stubby machine legs on a concrete runway.

"This is another Colonist-crewed craft which entered US airspace on the standard trajectory for Groom Lake early this morning. It crossed the coast in daylight at six hundred knots, descending from above ninety thousand feet, probably orbital. It was sighted by at least five civilian pilots, shadowed by four interceptors from the California Air National Guard, and has been reported on radio news. The craft landed at Groom Lake. When no activity was observed for an hour, a contact team entered. The nine Colonists on board were all dead, and there were signs of considerable violence. We don't have imagery yet due to the effect of the craft's electronics on recording equipment. We do have this."

The fat man's breath caught, audible through the room. The videoscreens showed a gurney enclosed with a rigid plastic shell. Inside was a tangle of gray and green and amber. The camera careened over to it, swung overtop. The team had arranged the Colonist in more or less the order its limbs were supposed to be in, fragile cartilaginous skeleton exposed amidst ribbons and gobbets of torn flesh. The smoker's eyes narrowed slightly. The colonel continued.

"According to the agreement we have with the Colonists, we placed these remains inside the antechamber of the Embassy. No activity was observed. We have sensors that can detect vibration and movement inside the structure placed outside the perimeter of the nullifying field, but we didn't even detect normal movement."

The picture switched to the trapezoidal blockhouse perched between two large hangars. More isolation suits milled around outside.

"As you know, gentlemen, we have no way of entering the Embassy proper short of blowing a hole in the wall. We're not going to take any action in that direction without consulting you, the M12 committee. That's the current state of play. We've

had no signal or contact from any of the normal Colonist channels, nor have any of the subsidiary bases reported any activity."

The fat man leaned forward slightly to speak into the microphone next to the video screen. "Colonel, what's the latest intelligence on the craft in Iran?"

"We don't have anything right now, sir. We have to find out where it is before we can get satellite imagery on the site. Based on one partial radar trace it's probably somewhere in northwestern Iran."

The Englishman turned to the older American.

"Direct all assets towards locating the craft. When it is located, a Protocol Four decision will be made," the Englishman said. The old American nodded almost imperceptibly. The smoker and the fat man both glanced at him. Pandhu's voice erupted from one speaker.

"Keith, have you taken all leave of your senses? Do you know what you are saying?"

"Protocol Four," the fat man said. "The control and dissemination of information regarding the existence of extraterrestrial life represents a critical security interest of the Allied nations. As such, the MAJESTIC Committee is empowered to employ national armed services through Protocol Two to prevent the dissemination of such information by other states."

Pandhu continued from the remote station, nearly shouting.

"Keith, you fool, you're looking in the wrong direction!"

"Dr. Pandhu! Do you have any information that may open other options for us?"

"What options? You're still following the old Project, Keith! Can't you see what's happening? They're all dying, Keith, just like the remote viewers and the psychic sensitives and all those other reports you're trying to keep secret as well. It's not about your Colonists and your secrets any more!"

The Englishman ignored Pandhu and turned to the smoker.

"Prepare the lists under Protocol Seven. Agent Mulder's termination remains a priority." He reached out to mute the video feed from this room over the network. "I will be traveling to Seattle to take charge of the project there. Alex Krycek has provided me with a list of the materials and information that Pandhu already gave or intends to give to Mulder. In keeping with his previously demonstrated sterling character, Mr. Krycek has offered to assist our cause while maintaining watch on Pandhu and his contact with Mulder or anyone else."

The Englishman sat up straight in his chair, a quietly triumphant look on his face.

"We have a unique opportunity here, friends. The vaccine may not be successful, but the Colonists appear to have handed us the means by which we can defeat them."

* * *

Charleston, West Virginia
5:43 PM

Dana Scully would never have believed, after finishing her undergraduate years, that she would unload two hundred dollars at Val-Mart-- especially on clothes. She was offered the option of dressing too old or too young, and instead took a uniform approach. Two pair of too-blue blue jeans, two white t-shirts, one black t-shirt, one men's denim shirt (small, \$12.99, our everyday great price!), one pair of cheap hiking boots, one pair of cheap sneakers, one ball cap, one pair of sunglasses. Two bras, four panties, one pure trailer-trash pushup bra, and two boxes of 9mm ammunition from Sporting Goods.

She remembered as she approached the cashier that she was carrying a pimp-worthy roll of hundreds in one pocket of Mulder's warmup bag. Scully fumbled around to pull out a few bills instead of unrolling the whole pile in front of customers who were hurrying to get home in time for Springer. Mulder was at the other end of the strip mall, buying maps and (hopefully) bullshitting his way through getting a couple of prepaid cell phones.

She glanced at the TV in the mall food court as she walked out towards the parking lot, drawn by the SPECIAL REPORT slug across the bottom of the screen.

"DC police are still saying nothing about the apparent mob-style execution of two policemen sometime Tuesday evening at a Southeast impound yard..."

* * *

Office of the Deputy Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, DC

"You have got to be kidding me!" Spender barked at Deputy Director Schoen.

The previous day had been a complete loss, ten solid hours of combined metro police and FBI grilling him and Spender about Monday's disastrous attempt to corner Krycek. Disastrous and fatal, Skinner reminded himself. Today they'd managed to escape into the files and notes Mulder had left on his desk, and found out from internal security that the surveillance files Spender had been working with had disappeared. The voice and fax intercepts were completely gone, and the video and audio material appeared to never have existed.

"That's enough, Agent Spender!" Schoen barked right back. "I know you're involved in this case, but do the math. One of Mulder's contacts turns up dead in Seattle. We got two dead pros in Mulder's apartment. Mulder calls in a 911 from Renton, Virginia, for three more murders, a social worker, a cop and a seven-year-old boy. What's the connection here?"

Spender bit down on his reply, letting Skinner do the talking.

"How about Alex Krycek?"

"Walter, we can't even prove there is an Alex Krycek," Schoen said. "We've got warrants for Mulder's and Scully's arrests on two counts of first-degree murder and they're wanted for questioning in connection with four more."

"That's insane! The security guard at Sherry Tsang's apartment made Krycek on the scene in Seattle! The man is a known killer!"

"So are Mulder and Scully, Walt, it's all in how you write it up." Schoen paused for a few seconds.

"There's another thing," he said. "I'm going to need all the files you have on Mulder's last investigation, the trip out to Washington State. It's all classified Top Secret for the time being. The Air Force said that we'll have access for evidence purposes if it's required."

"This is such bullshit!"

"I said that was enough, Spender! There is too much going on here and we are not going to be able to get a handle on it until we have Mulder and Scully available to answer a lot of questions. I'm assuming from your tone that you'd prefer not to participate in the effort to locate them."

Spender had already turned around and started walking out the door by the time his badge fell on Schoen's desk. Skinner reached out and picked it up.

"Dean, go easy on him. He got taken by Krycek, and he wants to make it right." Skinner paused for a second. "He hasn't taken a second off since he called me Friday night about Krycek."

"So what's your story, Walter?"

"You've seen the reports on the X-Files. I can assure you that's only been the half of it. It was only a matter of time before someone tried to shut them down permanently." What the hell, Skinner thought, and continued. "If you say you don't know what I'm talking about, Dean, you're a liar. I'm not clean. If you are, then you're the only one."

"Not all the decisions that get made for the right reasons are pretty ones, Walter," the Deputy Director replied. "It's a big country. It's a big world, and guys like us know there's a big picture. Stay on this, Walter. Stay in position and maybe we can do something for them."

Skinner stood up from the chair.

"I have three weeks sick and three weeks annual leave. I'm taking it right now."

* * *

The nature of individuality lay at the root of the dispute between the grays, Pandhu reflected as the first door, hissed shut behind him. A Colonist could lie, it could hate, it could covet and beg. The second door opened into the Colonist's cell and he entered. The others, the ones who called themselves Gatekeepers, had only the faintest vestiges of personalities. They observed; they acted as conduits for information. The difference between the families was most obvious in their manner of suicide. A Colonist would kill itself out of despair or arrogance or enmity, or to deprive its captors of the opportunity to exploit it. A Gatekeeper would simply die when it found itself in an unfavorable position with no possible benefit to its collective.

The empty black eyes swung up to meet him.

IMMORTAL SOUL.

The Colonist mocked him. To them, it was meant as a high honorific; applied to Pandhu, a jibe at his nature.

"What are the Gatekeepers trying to do?"

THEIR WEAKNESS IS THEIR UNDOING.

"Why do they need the humans?"

THE FOOLS MADE A BARGAIN.

"What sort of bargain?"

THEY CHOSE TO BE LESS THAN THEY COULD BE. IT IS THE NATURE OF LIFE TO STRUGGLE AND SURVIVE, TO GROW. THEY CHOSE TO LIMIT THEIR POTENTIAL. IT IS THAT WHICH FAILS THEM NOW.

"It's your kind that makes the fatal mistakes. Unleashes the forces you can't control."

DEFEAT IS FOUND EVERYWHERE. VICTORY IS ONLY FOUND IN BATTLE.

The Gatekeepers, Pandhu thought, would not even have a concept of "battle." They

s o k o l

would simply understand it as a particularly wasteful and desperate expenditure of resources to achieve some unique aim. The Colonists, with their unbending morals, their stern pronouncements, their judgments, their embrace of strife-- it was implausible that it was not the Colonists who were the rebels.

"To control what you've unleashed, what will we need? What is it that your incomplete brothers want to give to the human?"

PROPHECY. HE NEEDS TO KNOW HOW IT ENDS.

"How what ends?"

EVERYTHING.

"They hate you so much that they wouldn't share it with you?"

THERE ARE NONE AMONG US WHO MAY BEAR IT.

"None who are...?"

COMPLETE SOULS.

"This is very interesting information."

INDEED. ESPECIALLY FOR YOU.

The Colonist's eyes widened, and it blinked rapidly several times. It made a rare vocalization, a sort of gasping hiss.

"You seem distressed."

The force of the Colonist's will was obvious. Greenish-amber veins stood out along its neck and wrists as it strained. Its thoughts betrayed nothing.

IT APPEARS I SHALL DIE IN BATTLE.

Pandhu stepped back, recalling the violence of others taken by these forces.

"Shall I leave?"

YOU HAVE SEEN SO MANY OF YOUR OWN DEATHS. YOU WOULD DO ME AN HONOR TO WITNESS MINE. I SHALL NOT COMPOUND MY OWN DISHONOR BY ALLOWING THEM CONTROL.

The Colonist clenched its jaw shut, as if refusing some egress from inside its skull. It rose from the small chair and stood with its arms outstretched. Pandhu wondered if it was an intentional parody of a crucifixion; the Colonists had a limited understanding of, or interest in, human philosophy. They had little but scorn for what they knew. An awful wet gurgle came from the creature's throat, something that Pandhu realized was the Colonist's vocal apparatus rending and tearing inside as the gray refused to make a sound. It stiffened its posture and for the first time Pandhu sensed the Colonist's presence, its mind, as the dark presence gained ground.

The Colonist was proud.

The creature's arms twitched, snapping and popping sounds coming from its joints. Pandhu could see tendons thrum and snap like spastic worms under the papery skin. Its huge eyes collapsed inwards, honey-coloured liquid oozing from the ruined sockets. The jaw dropped wider than Pandhu had ever seen a gray's mouth open, and then with a hideous tearing noise the lower mandible wiggled obscenely and popped off, smacking to the floor.

The Colonist nodded its ruined head at Pandhu, once. He was aware of its departure as its ruined body collapsed to the floor in a heap, all of the bones disjointed. Pandhu could sense the invader retreating as well. It was confused and angered by its inability to utilize the Colonist's body for even a few moments of glorious destruction, denied by the gray's ferocious final defense.

* * *

Three more minutes and he was going to get nervous. Scully had said she would meet him out in front of the supermarket with the truck... now eighteen minutes ago, according to his watch. It was muggy and hot again and he stayed under the big awning, stepping awkwardly out of the way as people pushed by him with carts. He'd only managed the maps and a couple of bags of groceries. When he was

looking at the cell phones, he remembered Frohike's warning about not starting to use one's "new" credit cards anywhere near where the "old" you would be expected to be.

They hadn't come to a firm decision yet on exactly what they were doing. After their mutual breakdown yesterday morning it wasn't something either of them really wanted to consider in concrete terms.

"Come on!" A weirdly cheery horn beeped, and something low and white jerked to a stop in the loading zone. Scully motioned to him from inside the old sports car. He jogged across to her, squinting in the sun.

"Just get in, I'll explain." She was fiddling with the seat, though as Mulder folded himself into the little Datsun 260, he realized that the whole vehicle was built for someone her size to begin with. Half-seated, he tumbled as far as he could into the cramped interior when the car made a happy, burbling rumble and leapt eagerly forward. "Sorry," Scully said. "It's been a long time since I drove a stick..."

"What happened to the truck?"

"The police from the impound yard are dead. I saw it on the news. This was the only thing in the parking lot with a For Sale sign on it. I traded him the truck."

"You could have told me you were having a midlife crisis," Mulder said, yanking on the seatbelt. The tires squeaked and the car lurched again as she shifted into second. "Jesus!" He glanced into the back seat, saw her huge ValMart bag and his sports bag with their cash and false documents.

Cash and false documents, he thought. Rock and fucking roll.

"Do you have a better idea, Mulder?" She slammed the stick into third, the tires squeaking again. The car was too fast for the road in this gear, and he found himself pressing a phantom brake pedal as Scully wove in the traffic.

"No, no, it was a good call." She had decided to drive south, it appeared, or at least that was the direction with the least traffic. The inside of the car was dark gray leather, and it smelled slightly of cigarettes though the ashtray was clean. Scully wore sunglasses-- new, cheap-looking-- and seemed to have settled into driving, her

hand still resting on the ball of the shifter. Summer sun cut by the window frame slashed a line of light and dark across her thighs. When they pulled up behind a truck, she downshifted and punched it hard, pressing Mulder back in his seat and howling past the eighteen-wheeler. It shrank into a sun-chromed miniature in the mirror before she let up, the needle hovering over ninety.

"I had one like this for a year and a half before I went to med school. I took Missy when I went used car shopping." She wore no makeup, and the circles under her eyes were clear and betraying. "Ahab was less than impressed, I think largely because it was Japanese."

"He should have been happy. You wouldn't have been able to see over the dash of a Camaro or something. Much safer this way."

"Bad move, Mulder. I was just thinking that Adidas bags full of cash and ammunition, sports cars, being on the run-- it's practically a recipe for scorching sleazy motel sex. Then you just had to open your big mouth."

"Ouch," he winced. He tried to glance nonchalantly at the speedometer, which was still over eighty. "We should probably be trying to avoid speeding tickets, especially since I am pretty sure this thing has a kilo of hash in the wheel well. I didn't know those little feet could weigh so much."

"You're right. Just... just felt like going fast," she said distractedly.

Mulder rummaged in his bag, pulling out the thick folder of files on the Vostok. Scully glanced over at it.

"So where are we driving it?" she asked. She stared at the road, trying not to show any emotion or even interest.

Mulder opened the file. The pictures he'd taken, burnt coils of wire and instrumentation scattered in the damp grass. "If the pattern holds, we have... until sometime late Saturday evening. That's when the next manifestation should be." Falling from sky and history at six hundred miles per hour. An unmarked and unfinished face on a suggestion of a body. 'Why am I here?' she asked Mulder with her unfinished tongue. Every time there is more of her, as if the spirit is somehow reforming itself, learning from each experience.

This, of course, didn't constitute an answer.

"I'm not ashamed to say that I have followed you. I'm proud to have followed you. And even when I questioned you, I think that you have always done the right thing. I've said it before, Mulder. I wouldn't change a thing."

* * *

Modell shot Scully, then he and Mulder shot each other, Skinner willed to the coroner's assistant who stood in the middle of the room, rubbing his forehead. No one had to know any different. Mulder hadn't been very cooperative in this, seeing as how Modell had been smashed beyond recognition from the shoulders up with a chair, before somehow managing to reload the revolver and shoot Mulder in the face while Mulder stood over Scully's body with his back to Modell. Fortunately they hadn't turned up any family who would want to identify the Pusher's body. A cop was bagging up the gun they had picked up off the floor. Skinner walked over to him. Read my mind, boys. Please. The sergeant in charge looked at Skinner, looked at the coroner's assistant figuring out how best to move the dead bodies apart. The piece stayed in Skinner's desk at home for almost two weeks before he did a little work with a hammer and chisel and dumped it in the Potomac.

* * *

The strange, underwater sound of the Russian voice in the Gunmen's office. It was empty now, Mulder imagined, probably all carted away to be puzzled and pried for the secrets of where the three wizards had flown to from their tower. His own apartment had two dead people in it, of course. He imagined Krycek tearing through Scully's things, the game now over except for the hunt. "Kill them," the smoker would have said. Why do you all want a ghost? Scully says there's no such things as ghosts. Did the ghosts talk to Jared Keelor? Did the ghosts rip the flesh off his poor little bones?

Mulder felt as if he was looking back at himself, beckoning to himself, waiting to feel the pull, to lose himself in the chase again. I'm too tired, too run out to start anyway, he thought, but he knew that it had never stopped him before. He slowly closed the file of questions, aware without seeing of Scully watching him.

"We'll keep going south, hole up again tonight. I think we should try to call Skinner tomorrow morning, figure out our next move when we've got some space. If someone's going to start calling us cop killers I'd rather not be near DC."

* * *

South it is? Yee-haw? What do I say?

Mulder is still flipping through the files. I almost want him to leap at me and say we can't just let this go. There's something here that I want to do that I can't explain. It's not supposed to be like this. We're supposed to drag ourselves from the wreckage of the mothership, kiss passionately, and then we get to go home. We're the heroes, damn it. But Mulder's eminently non-bulletproof, and I am one chip away from...

Oh, shit.

"Mulder, the implant. They've... they've done things. What if they can find me?"

He closed the file.

"You think they wouldn't have already, if they could?" Mulder replied. "I don't think it works like that. I don't think the smoker and his friends have as much control over that particular situation as they pretend to."

"Can we take that chance?"

"We can't exactly take it out." Mulder stuffed the file back in his bag in the back seat and rolled down the window. "Anybody tries to abduct you, I'm just going to abduct their ass, shove something up there and see how the fuck they like it."

It's his pimp-voice, the same one he uses for variations on the theme from "Shaft" that Isaac Hayes never imagined. He's joking, again. But I remember, some nights, before I could just reach across and touch him. I chased the monsters crowding at the edges of sleep with dark, guilty, giddy imaginings of Mulder. Mulder, large hands and blazing dark eyes, turned loose among the men who had taken me, doing the terrible things that I wouldn't admit to wanting to do myself. I just shoot people, and it's not the same.

* * *

His tail was obviously a professional who wanted to be noticed, the smoker thought. He tail was wearing dress shoes, making plenty of noise that echoed through the parking garage.

I've got to stop meeting like this, the smoker thought. Good line, he'd remember that.

"Yes?" He turned around. The young Indian man held up his hands, then reached slowly into his suit jacket. The smoker reflected that Pandhu's operative would have been a good match for Keith's departed assassins, fashionable and expensive looking.

"Consular staff?" the smoker asked as he took the cell phone the young man held out to him.

"DGMI, military intelligence. Your student visa procedure has some serious holes. Hit speed dial one."

The smoker tapped the phone.

"I'll have to have a word with someone about that." The other line rang once, and was picked up.

"Hello, my friend!" Pandhu said. "Is the man who gave you this phone alive?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good, good, he's one of my nephews," Pandhu chuckled. "Family's important, don't you think?"

The smoker waited several seconds before answering.

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"I never had children myself, but I am Uncle Vij to many..." He trailed off.

"So what did you want to talk about?" The smoker took a few steps away from the young man, who was standing patiently, waiting.

"Keith has children, you know," Pandhu said. "Grandchildren. I think he may have a lot on his mind."

"Yes, I know." And he was old, the smoker thought. Keith was one of the very first, a man of a different era, breeding, and background. Keith was concerned with his own legacy, with his name. He knew that he was unlikely to retain power or probably even live until the Project came to fruition. It drove him to acts of gallantry-- or foolhardiness-- to make his indelible stamp on future history. The smoker heard sounds of shifting and motion on the line. Pandhu was sitting down, he thought.

"Are you really ready to follow Protocol Seven now?"

"I am evaluating the situation," the smoker replied. The lists were updated quite conscientiously, he thought. They were one-way, of course, you could get on but you would never get off. The task had grown so much, though. Back when they started maintaining the lists, they had perhaps a hundred people in total. You could put them in a school gymnasium on a military base, begin the processing there. The Protocol Seven lists took up eighty thick binders now, a page per name. Of course, it was all on computer, probably one of the ever-popular digital tapes.

You can't do the actual processing by computer, though.

"I know you have already stalled in your supposed pursuit of Agent Mulder."

"Is that so?" the smoker said, looking at the young man.

"There are many things I can't explain to you at this time. I'm supportive of that course of action, though, as long as we don't lose sight of him completely. On another note, you saw the images... related to the embassy?"

"Yes, I did."

"You remember, of course, the incident at Fort Meade, with the viewer?"

"Of course, it was very interesting." The smoker had gone home that night, such as

home was, and had a very large drink. It was both liberating and terrifying to see something that could not be attributed to mere human violence and stupidity.

"This project, here, where I am, is central to the successful management of this situation."

"Oh really? That's very interesting as well, thank you." The wheels turned, everything speeding forward.

"Listen to me, I am sounding like one of your group now," Pandhu chuckled. "Please, continue the course of action you have very wisely chosen. If you can meet with me at some time in the next few days, it would be very good."

"I will see what I can do on those issues."

"Then we have an understanding, my friend! It's good that we both have a... a common vision of what is important."

"Yes, yes, one more thing, Dr. Pandhu," the smoker said. The younger man noticed him almost grinning. "I have discussed certain staffing issues with you before, as you recall."

"Yes, of course," Pandhu replied.

"I think you are likely to find that the opinions I shared with you regarding Mr. Krycek have proved correct."

"Oh, really? Interesting, everything is so interesting these days. I will definitely take that into consideration."

"Good. Goodbye, Doctor, I have several urgent matters to attend to."

"Goodbye. Always remember what's important, my friend." The smoker clicked the phone off, handing it back to the young Indian man.

* * *

Crystal City, Maryland

9:17 PM

"Yeah, you sure about that? Look, thanks, that's great, I owe you one." Spender smiled into the phone. "Okay, that works. The rest of this week is looking like hell... maybe next weekend? All right, talk to you then. Take care."

"What was that?" They were at Skinner's apartment, having relieved themselves of their office space for the time being. Spender put his cell phone back on the coffee table.

"MacEvoy in Forensics," he said, sitting down on one of the chairs. It was a nice chair. Skinner rented the place already furnished. Even now, it was one of the things he couldn't bring himself to do. He'd never bought a piece of furniture alone. "Good news and not so bad news. The rounds that killed the woman in Mulder's apartment were from Scully's gun. Mulder got the guy. They have ID's on them now. Both former military, definitely pros."

"Anything on the bodies from Renton?" Skinner had found his stock of FBI favors rapidly evaporating in the wake of his suspension. All his friends were at a high enough level that they had to cover their own asses.

"Yeah, that's the good news, in a way. The social worker and the cop appear to have been killed by Jared Keelor, aged seven. There's prints, skin and hair, everything. He literally tore them apart with his bare hands. It doesn't make sense, but there's nothing on Mulder or Scully. If Mulder hadn't made the 911 call we wouldn't have known they were even there."

"What killed the boy?"

"They don't know. Massive internal trauma with no external cause. They can't call it homicide unless they figure out how it happened. Mulder and Scully are still the only witnesses, though."

Spender had copies of Mulder's files spread out on Skinner's coffee table. It was definitely still a smashed antique spaceship, unfortunately, or two of them if he was reading what looked like military intelligence documents correctly. Skinner was in the kitchen, calling up boxing buddies at DC Metro police. The younger man stood

up from the couch, looking out over Skinner's balcony. Why is this worth trying to kill two federal agents? What does this have to do with the Renton horrorshow? Oh, and let's not forget asking why it's important enough for me to be Alex Krycek's bitch for a couple of weeks?

Skinner stepped back into the living room and put the cordless back in its cradle. Spender was looking out through the curtains of Skinner's third-floor condo.

"Somebody's staking us out."

"Where?" Skinner peered out the corner of the window into the early night, careful not to pull the blinds open.

"There," the younger man pointed. "Blue Crown Vic. They just got chased out of your residents' parking by that Jeep there, moved over to that lot... there, and nobody got out."

"Good eye."

"What do you figure," Spender asked, "DC police, FBI, or Men in Black?"

Skinner stepped back from the window.

"I think it might be a good sign for the time being. Whoever it is probably isn't friends with Alex Krycek." Spender nodded, sliding down from the window and onto the couch. "What'd you get?"

Skinner looked back at the phone, as if expecting it to provide assistance.

"DC Metro is being real cooperative, considering. There's enough guys over there who know me that they're ready to believe us about Krycek. I think they're hoping to hush up the black-market angle on that impound yard, too. There was some suspicion these cops were dirty and it was an ongoing investigation, but they'd rather not blow it open if this is the end of it. Off the record, there's an eyewitness from their internal affairs department who saw two people matching Mulder and Scully's description walk into the yard and leave in a green Chevy SUV late Monday evening."

"Do we have plates?" Spender asked.

"Not likely."

"A couple in their thirties in a green SUV. That narrows it right down."

"We have to assume that Krycek, or the smoking bastard, or whoever, is already one step ahead of us."

"Then why'd he come to Renton the other night?"

"I don't know." Skinner suddenly stood straightened up, striding purposefully into the kitchen. "You want a beer?"

"I want ten beer," Spender replied. "Ten beer and a woman. I want Alex Krycek to bring me ten beer and a woman."

"Start with one." Skinner held the bottle out to the younger man. "Beer, that is." Spender dragged long on it as Skinner sat down on the other end of the couch. They drank for a few minutes.

"I think we should go to Seattle," Skinner said.

"You think Mulder's going there?"

"If he's not, whoever's following us hoping to pick up a lead will go there too. And if that's where the center of this really is, Krycek will go back there eventually. And if that's where Mulder and Scully are going..."

"Critical fuckup mass."

"What?" Skinner turned sideways. Spender was damn hard to follow sometimes.

"If you put all active participants in any situation in one place, it exponentially increases the possibility that any one participant's plan will get totally fucked up. Usually seen at weddings and family reunions."

"They teach you that at the Academy?"

"Naw, I just made it up right now. It's got a certain elegance to it, doesn't it?"

"When'd you get to be such a wiseass, Spender?" Skinner's bottle clinked empty on the glass coffee table and he stood up, heading into the kitchen again.

"Who cares? If I wake up and this is really happening I'm just going to shoot myself anyway."

Skinner came back into the living room with two more beers.

"Completely off the record, and with the qualification that this is really bad career advice," the older man began, "you're a better man than the Bureau deserves some days."

"I helped make this mess. I want to help clean it up."

"That's enough right there, Jeff. If more of us had thought like that along the way... maybe things would be different. I know you've had a rough few months, and... this, what you're doing, takes a lot of character."

Spender watched Skinner for a few moments, waiting until the moment passed.

"You sound like my high school football coach," he said. Skinner snorted in response, taking a long sip. "So, Seattle."

"There's something going on there. If Mulder and Scully are staying on the ground, under the radar, we can beat them out there, hopefully have Krycek nailed to a fucking post and have things cleared up so they can surface when they get there and get real protection."

"Then we'd better get going." The younger agent looked at his beer, and took another long pull on it. Skinner stood up. He hadn't managed to stay seated for more than half a beer. Too jumpy, too tired to stay tired.

"I'll get some tickets. Flight back is on you if we're still suspended."

Skinner punched numbers into the phone as Spender reassembled the files on the

table with one hand, pulling out the maps and copies of Mulder's notes.

"Flight's at twelve-twenty," Skinner said. "Red-eye. You got anything to take care of?"

"Like what?" Spender asked, standing up.

"I dunno." Skinner shrugged. "Feed the cat. Make any calls. You got a girlfriend?"

"Are you asking me to go steady?"

* * *

North of Nashville, Tennessee

11:21 PM

The little Datsun had what Scully said her father had called two-sixty air conditioning: roll down two windows and go sixty. It hadn't helped much, even when they tried it as two-eighty-five, and they had spent part of the afternoon and early evening asleep in a picnic area, planning to drive through the cooler and less inhabited night. The sun was long down and Scully was still driving, seemingly by default. Mulder didn't think the seat went back far enough for him to comfortably work the clutch anyway.

"So you used to have a little white sports car?"

"Blue," she said, and he could tell that she had cut off a small smile. "And it wasn't like this. Whoever had this car has done a lot of work on it. Mine was pretty fast, though, especially if you asked my mom."

"I have kind of a hard time seeing it," Mulder grinned at her, teasing.

"There was a short stretch, maybe eight months, when Missy and I were first both definitely adults and friends. We hadn't always been. I grew out of the baby fat, lost my virginity, felt less insecure, finished my year of college, and she stopped rebelling just for the hell of it. We had a lot of fun; we'd go to parties together, sometimes take off for the weekend. We could get away with more, from Mom and Ahab, if we went together. She'd lost her license for a year for drunk driving when

she was twenty-one, anyway, so I always drove her around."

They had decided on Nashville, temporarily.

"Where's the state in the union you're least likely to go voluntarily, Scully?"

"Tennessee. Alabama. Missouri. Anywhere in the Cracker Belt."

"Woman after my own heart. Know anybody in Nashville? Ever been to Nashville?"

"Can't say I have."

"Me either. Nashville it is."

There was no indication they'd been followed further than the impound yard in DC, or at least they hadn't heard their names on the radio. They'd put together a plan of calling two or three contacts each and giving the impression they were traveling separately, trying to get as much information as possible on what they might be facing if and when they surfaced.

Scully looked over at him.

"You know, Mulder, I saw you perk up when I said 'virginity'."

Mulder chuckled.

"So what was your big adventure? The big defining moment of Dana Scully's briefly misspent youth?"

"Well, it certainly wasn't losing my virginity. Probably... One time, I was twenty-one... I was home for the summer. Missy got me really stoned and we went to a rock concert."

"You got stoned?"

"Oh, yeah. The first and only time in my whole life. Missy ended up driving us because I couldn't do anything except laugh. We drove to the stadium at maybe eight miles per hour, stopped for Mcdonalds on the way, the whole thing."

"What was the concert?"

"Phil Collins."

"Oh, Scully." Mulder put on an exaggeratedly pained expression. "Every time I think I'm discovering something wild and different about you..."

"What?" she laughed.

"You got high to see Phil Collins? That's just, that's not even wrong."

"Well, it was a big step for me."

The morning had been the worst, grim and edgy, alternately clinging to each other and then pulling away. They took their newfound freedom, the gradual slipping away of their ability to pretend to withstand anything, and blatantly misused it. Every time Mulder seemed distant and haunted she'd felt a sick, self-centered urge to try and go him one better. I'll see your sister and raise you a daughter. They'd driven right through the night until they were too tired to see, slept in the car for four hours, then had a petty, passive-aggressive fight about which direction to go. Then they realized that neither of them had eaten in sixteen hours, and had a sobby, slobbery makeup over truck stop breakfasts.

"Was that the last concert you ever went to?" Mulder asked.

"A rock concert? I saw U2 in 1988. That was it, though, except for..."

"Well, yeah, being narks doesn't count. I haven't been to one since I was in England. There was just so much going on then, even for me. It's too bad we're old now."

"I have eight months until my thirty-fifth birthday, Mulder, I'm not old yet."

"So are you telling me it's okay to forget that one?"

"It wouldn't be any fun if I told you in advance."

The car's engine chuffed suddenly, stumbling, and the dashboard lights flickered.

s o k o l

The radio dissolved into static, the volume rising and then abruptly quitting. Scully stared irritably at the dash for a moment, then noticed Mulder's jaw dropping as he looked up through the windshield. The car stalled out and began to coast, everything dark, as the white light flooded in from above them and a hollow roaring sound rose over the rumble of the wheels on the highway.

* * *

s o k o l

v

p i e c e s

hello, is there anybody in there, can anybody hear me?

Scully?

Oh god, Scully's screaming...

* * *

I am a vessel inside a vessel, I am a deadly cargo, I am a warhead, a bomb for the soul.

It does not really matter if I have control of my body, as I seem to, as there is nothing for me to do. I am pushed to a corner of my own mind as the others investigate me, rearrange me, rewire me as the mother of their monstrous selves. They have changed something inside me that I can withstand their energy, that the mind and the core of me is not driven mad simply by their presence. I know what their presence, their arrival when they try to tear the walls of reality aside to walk through, does to the living. They have shown me.

I was not surprised to discover that I am no longer among the living. I remember

s o k o l

now previous deaths, previous life and succeeding half-lives. The first, remembering Comrade Gagarin's story, telling myself that the awful scent and sound of my craft vaporizing around me was normal, it would pass, that the streaks and sparks of flame were normal. That even if the streaks and sparks were a bad sign, that it was almost over, that at any moment we would be to an altitude where my pressure suit should protect me. That it would be fitting, a fine story to tell the girls, that after almost freezing for ten days right at the end I was afraid that I would melt. Then I saw elemental fire reach for me through the rim of the hatch.

I am a creation of theirs. They have dragged my poor soul from its confusion to build this body on my memory of myself, to serve as their beachhead.

My second life I remember only pain, not thought. I remember choking for what amounted to my entire life.

I can look down, I see. The viewports are down by my feet. There is a tiny reflection in the glass, and I look no different. I am one, and multitudes, thousands at least. And we all wheel around this great globe that is no longer my home, our little sphere of metal and frost, rubber and wood, waiting to plunge back into the rich depths of life. They will open the door, and we shall all rush forth. I wonder how long they need me, when shall my children kill me.

Of my third life I remember that there must have been enough of me to hold whatever this is that I believe to be me. I hovered in unlife animated only by their terrible energy. If I could have moved my hands, I could have opened the hatch blown us all into vacuum.

They won't let me, and they let me know that even if I could end it once, we would just rebuild me again.

When I look at the earth I feel separation, and loneliness. My busy children feel hunger, and envy, and anticipation.

* * *

"Scully!"

There is something over him like an eclipse, a corona of white light around

s o k o l

something dull and round. It moves, letting more light suffuse it, and he sees its eyes. It steps back then leans forward, inclining its head and lifting a spindly arm. It does not point; its fingers do not seem accustomed to that. His wide, wondering eyes follow the arm. He can see her legs, bare in her shorts, shoes still on her feet. He notices that he cannot move; and his head is suddenly released enough that he can crane his neck around to see more of her. Her body now, illuminated from below by soft yellow light. The blocky table she lies on is featureless on its sides. She is motionless, though he senses her breathing.

The first communication comes as a shock, a burst of static inside his head.

UNHARMED UNDAMAGED UNAWARE UNHARMED UNDAM

The static refined itself, almost like a radio being tuned.

THE OTHER IS NOT HARMED. THE OTHER IS UNAWARE.

"Let her..." go. He discovers it is not necessary to speak, and that there is something in the atmosphere that makes sound distort.

SOON. WE MUST COMMUNICATE WITH YOU.

Why?

WE ARE GOING TO DIE. A TASK REMAINS INCOMPLETE. YOU REQUIRE INFORMATION.

What? Let Scully go! Let her go and I'll listen.

THERE IS NO TIME.

?

IT IS NOT GOOD THAT IT IS LIKE THIS. PLEASE READY YOURSELF.

?

s o k o l

The gray, for that's what it was, there was nothing else he could see besides the light and part of the floor but it was real, it turned its head down slightly and it said sorry? and it has something in its hand...

They tell him about monsters then, and he did what everyone does when they are a child and they are told stories about monsters.

* * *

Seattle, Washington

"In time, life forms become so advanced that they are no longer distinguishable as such in the way they once were. Matter is transitory. It is awareness, existence distilled to knowledge and spirit, that endures."

Pandhu maintained an office here, in a suburban house. There was a flag out front; it was probably a consular property. The smoker found something infuriatingly self-righteous about the room, with its understated Swedish furniture and its racks of books about the moral triumphs of developing nations.

"But for all the power of age, and time, and spirit, the laws of physics are inexorable. Perhaps somewhere astronomers on a little blue star mused in their time about the contraction of that universe as the ancient souls around faced the dilemma of eternal life in a finite space. And in time, they were all that was left. Their universe was crushed by the last great heartbeat of their reality. The next beat brought..."

His brown hands spread in a gesture of encompass.

"They have waited, friend, and watched, somewhere... and evolved, over time, in the way of things. They have a memory of a reality greater than what they have sustained through sheer force of will. A reality like ours. They want to come back."

What kind of point have I reached, the smoker thought, when nothing sounds like madness to me any more?

"This woman, the cosmonaut. She is a sign of their power, an unintentional one. She is their power, seeping through the fabric of reality that separates their dimension from ours. The bodies that have been found, her body, represent the power they are

s o k o l

now perfecting... the power for the soul to give itself form and shape. She is recreating herself, based on her memory of life, with every cycle of her death."

Pandhu leaned back in the swivel chair, satisfied with his explanation.

"She is their womb, my friend, the mother of demons waiting to be reborn."

"What you describe is beyond science," the smoker said.

"Of course."

* * *

"Please... Scully... Let her see..." The one standing over me turns ninety degrees sideways, looking at her. The gray elephant-skinned head turns back briefly in my direction.

WAIT NOW.

Two others step to either side of Scully's head, looking down at her. Her eyes are closed. One of the two staggers slightly on its spindly legs, as if struck, and looks up at the one standing over me.

DAMAGED. INCOMPLETE PROCEDURE PERFORMED. TAKEN BY THE OTHERS, BEFORE.

They hurt her.

NORMAL PROCEDURES ARE TO DESTROY ONES TAKEN AND DAMAGED BY THE OTHERS.

No!

NO. SCULLY IS OUTSIDE NORMAL PROCEDURES. SCULLY IS IMPORTANT. YOU HAVE BEEN INFORMED OF THAT. SCULLY CANNOT BE ALTERED.

What do you mean?

IT WILL BE CLEAR IN TIME.

The huge eyes blink, slowly.

* * *

"You're making a play, aren't you," the smoker mused aloud, trying to regain the initiative.

"What?"

"You want the body of the Project, with your group as the new head."

Pandhu looked infuriated, his gentle face twisting.

"You don't understand, do you? Have you heard a word that I said? This is so far beyond the conception of politics that..."

"Dr. Pandhu..." The smoker stepped forward and put his knuckles on the thin wood of the Swedish desk. "I understand you perfectly. I do what I can. I have always done what I can. I make decisions and alliances based on power. I always have. In the past, I followed those I trusted. Now I am making those decisions myself."

"Are all human lives equal, my friend?"

"In the final accounting, yes, they have to be. There are variations, of course. The foundation of our beliefs is the equality of mankind. If all men were not created equal, then power would cease to be an exercise of will, become an entitlement. Those who believe they are entitled to power are rarely capable of wielding it. Sacrifices are sometimes necessary to properly wield power."

"What about your son's life?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have a son."

"You have not raised a son, you mean," Pandhu rotated slightly in the chair. "Or have you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," the smoker said, too loud.

"We need men like Fox Mulder. We need men like your son, men who believe."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

Pandhu looked out the patio window. It was raining on the deck. The smoker wanted to do something else. He was tired. He wanted to sleep at night, rise in the morning, read the newspaper.

"You said the Colonists are responsible for releasing these entities, allowing them access to this world," the smoker said. "Why did they do this?"

"They face defeat. Here, and elsewhere. It is an act of desperation even greater than their collaboration with your Consortium."

"So Keith was very close to the truth when he wanted to ally with the rebels, the ones you call the Gatekeepers."

"It's unlikely that he would have been able to do so. You have little to offer them, and it is not in their nature to bargain."

"Keith would have offered them a world."

"That was your mistake in the first place, after the war." Pandhu's voice held a trace of bitterness. "Dazzled by technology, flying saucers, hints of terrible weapons, you bowed and scraped. The Colonists needed our world. The Gatekeepers don't."

"Then why deal with them? What's the exchange?"

"Do you know what we learned from the ones you call the rebels, my friend? While your Colonists were throwing you crumbs, teaching you to fly spaceships and rearrange a few building blocks of matter like sand castles? We didn't make that mistake. We didn't approach them, bowing and begging."

Vijay Pandhu rose slightly, smiling. His pose stayed strangely relaxed, reclined in his chair. The smoker saw the Indian's crossed knees rising above his desk, as if the chair was rising to give him a podium for the close of his speech.

"They taught," Pandhu said.

The smoker was not aware of his cigarette falling to the floor, scattering a tiny flare of ash and sparks across the black tip of his shoe as Pandhu straightened his legs, standing on nothingness, rising in the air over his chair, the tips of his shoes hovering just over the desktop. He looked down at the smoker, his bald head just short of the ceiling, smiling as if at his own little joke.

"And we learned."

* * *

"Let me go," Mulder whispered. "Just let me go to her." His limbs returned to him, and he sat up on the table. The gray stepped carefully out of his way. It's so small, he thought distractedly, walking over to Scully. There were small things on the floor, conduits and housings streamlined for small shuffling feet to walk over. Scully looked asleep, warm and alive. He was grateful for that.

The knowledge, the package they were so sorry to give him, sat in his head like a black mirror with everything on the surface. The very presence of it felt foreign and strange, intruding. There should have been more, they knew, after everything that had passed between their kind and Mulder's, but there was just so little time left.

All their heads cocked sideways now, a little pack of ugly gray dogs. Mulder settled on the edge of the table Scully lay on, the oblong, asymmetrical patches of light under her a soft yellow-green. He was crying, he realized, feeling his sinuses fill and wide streaks slipping down his cheeks.

"Scully?" No sign, except... perhaps her breathing changed slightly. He leaned forward, resting his hand on her shoulder and laying his head on her breast, nuzzling to part the denim of her shirt so his cheek felt the slow beat of her great fiery hero's heart. The yellow-green light around her strengthened, became a halo, then a brilliant corona. It glowed through the weave of her clothes, through the delicate skin of her ears, even faintly through her slender hands. A gray head nodded to him.

* * *

Seattle, Washington

"So you know our smoking friend has been meeting with Pandhu on the side," Alex Krycek said. "I don't know what about, unfortunately."

"Yes," the Englishman replied. "That's always been his failing. He considers himself a man of action, but he plays games, doesn't act when bold action is what's required."

Krycek opened the red-bordered manila folder. There were several magnetic-strip access cards inside, and several pages of organisation charts. All the material was marked PROTOCOL SEVEN--MAJESTIC CHANNELS ONLY. He flipped through a list of some seventy-odd locations. Lions Athletic Hall, Wichita, Kansas. Sgt. Robichaud Auditorium, Fort Bragg. Community Sportsplex, Athens, Georgia.

"Why me?" Krycek asked, holding up the folder. "I'm not really a desk job kind of guy. I'm more... hands-on."

"I know I can trust you, Alex. You're a man of action, especially when you don't have other options." The Englishman considered him for a few seconds. "Besides, Alex, you've done this kind of work before, haven't you? Panama City... Tegucigalpa... These will just speak English, and probably have fewer children."

"Why now?" Alex asked.

"We don't want to leave any possible avenues for our new weapon to be used against us. All who have undergone Colonist procedures must be considered as... compromised."

"How many?" Krycek scanned the list of processing centers. Three for DC, one for Idaho and Montana together. The black helicopter crowd will be so disappointed to learn they're not first priority.

"Eight thousand, four hundred, give or take a few. Only two dozen in Group I. You'll be pleased to know that Dana Scully was recently promoted, so they're both an immediate priority--as is our smoking friend."

"When do we begin?"

"There will have to be a brief period of accommodation, until we secure the cosmonaut and begin our exploitation of her. For right now, he still controls the military resources we are relying upon to make the recovery. If they are suddenly presented with a... tactical situation, they might choose to support the devil they know."

"So, Monday? Monday's always a bitch," Krycek said. Desk job it is. He'd reached an accommodation with the reptile in his head that, Alex detachedly realized, probably meant he was going insane.

And so be it. When it all comes down, as it inevitably will, he would stand tall on the mortifying pile of his own mighty workings as the equal of any monster that would come to claim him.

He wanted to cut Scully's head off. Nothing personal, nothing macabre, he'd shoot her first, but Mulder would love that. We took her, we let you find her, let you play your little games, now it's all done Mulder, here, catch a falling red-haired star. He'd never intentionally cut off a head before, and it's not like anyone would be keeping track.

* * *

North of Nashville, Tennessee
11:30PM EST

"Okay, try it now..."

Mulder pushed the clutch in and turned the key. The car rumbled to life, shaking as the big engine spooled up.

"What was it?" he asked, leaning out the open door as Scully lowered the hood, rubbing her hands on her too-large shorts.

"Gremlins, probably," she said, looking down at the hood. "Weird little car."

"Have to remember to check the Lemon-Aid book next time you buy a car in a mall

parking lot. Want me to drive?"

"Yeah, sure. Just carry me in when we get to a motel."

"Scully, that's so romantic."

"Not with the usual choice of Southern motels. I just don't want my feet touching the floor."

Scully curled up in the bucket seat, bunching up the denim shirt she'd been wearing over her tee and tucking it under her head on the inside of the door. Her eyes slipped out of focus for a moment, gazing at herself in the dark night reflection of the passenger-side mirror.

"Are you okay?" She blinked, starting, pulling slightly tighter into herself.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, I'm just exhausted."

"Just... go to sleep, I'll get us there." Mulder reached across to her, tangling his fingers in her hair as he pulled back onto the surprisingly quiet interstate. She nuzzled against his hand for a few seconds, and then stilled as her breathing steadied.

The black mirror spun in his head, casting painful reflections.

* * *

Several had gone already, calling out when they could no longer hold their consciousness against the bludgeoning invasion of the others. A swift fall of sharp metal and the body fell useless to the deck plates. The lights inside the craft glowed feebly and randomly as the black ones tried to invade its orderly mind, and it retreated to only that which was absolutely necessary to maintain itself. The grays did the same, huddled in a small group in front of the last few panels that gave bright lights and orderly truth. Small hands fluttered on bony shoulders and hips, bodies and minds touching each other to strengthen their last moments and those of their conveyance. The craft moved at its full capacity for the first time in what could truly be called an age, like a horse running itself to death, a streak of fleeing glory

moving itself beyond where any of the young ones, the humans, could ever find it. The others who moved within the ship's mind coiled themselves in rage, realizing that they were trapped in the determination of the ancient craft and its small occupants.

The planet had been warm and wet and green, impossibly green once, before the young ones were even considered. The surveyors had fanned out among the great and uncaring denizens of the blue-green globe whose bones and sinews now hardened or flowed black and volatile under its surface. There had been giant insects, jeweled and starlike, that fluttered around them agitatedly, butting for pollen against gray skin. They themselves had been younger then, with less knowledge and less accompanying responsibility. Now they only had the memory of it, but that memory itself, of the yellow light and the warm mists and the fantastical, doomed creatures, it still stirred the old feelings.

It had been good.

There was a small flurry of shining motion as perfectly aligned reflexes worked in time, thrusting shining points through delicate skin. The atmosphere vented out of the body of the failing conveyance, silencing the sound of small devices and light bodies falling to the floor as the last few panels winked out. The ship felt its occupants leave, moving to another place of which even they were only dimly aware, and it undertook its last responsibility in a brief blaze of white light.

* * *

Northwestern Missouri
Wednesday, 3 June
6:30 AM

"Hmmm... how long have I... what time is it?" Scully looked up blearily, curled in the passenger seat. Dawn was breaking behind them.

"About six-thirty." Mulder looked strange, feverish.

"Where are we?" she asked, sitting up. "Where's Nashville?"

"It's still in Tennessee." She looked irritated at his glib response, rubbing at her face,

looking around at the prairie rolling past.

"Mulder, where the hell are we?"

"Missouri somewhere, closing on Iowa." he said quietly, with a color of shame.

"What the hell? Stop the goddamn car!"

"Scully, I can explain, please..."

"No! Stop the fucking car right now!" Scully slammed her fist against the window glass, once, twice. Her eyes widened, and her expression changed from anger to shock. She started to double over as Mulder pulled to the side of the highway, grabbing at the dashboard. A small fist hammered against her thigh, then the glass again. Scully shoved the long door open as she stumbled out onto the dry grass, taking a few long strides, her fingers dragging before she fell to her knees. Mulder slid over the hood of the car to run up beside her, crouching down to place his hand on her shoulder.

* * *

Look, I am one of you, she had tried to say at one point. I had a supervisor. I had a mask. I know how it feels when you sweat into the cap. I am one of you, please don't put anything else inside me.

* * *

"Don't fucking touch me!" He fell backwards, landing on his tailbone and his hands. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Scully curled herself up into a ball on her knees, the top of her head pressed against the cool ground. As Mulder pulled himself up to a sitting position, she rolled over on her side, knees still pulled up to her chest. He noted in the Compendium Of Everything Scully that this was a new one, a worse one. Her face shone with tears in the sunrise.

* * *

s o k o l

The light was so beautiful. I never realized it was so simple before, everything is right there. Cassandra is so lucky. What are those lights? What are they doing my god they have no faces...

* * *

"Oh, God, Mulder, what happened? Something happened... they took me again, didn't they... oh God..." Scully reached around to the back of her neck with a trembling hand, her fist pounding into her flesh from the awkward angle with desperate force. Mulder crawled towards her.

"Scully... no... it wasn't like before... they took us both... they told me." He slid his arms under her, feeling her stiffen as he held her upper body in his lap.

"What..?"

"They tried to explain. The Russian spaceship..." Mulder sat up straighter, pulling himself together. He looked away from her for a second, towards the horizon. "It's not a haunting, it's... something else. She's trying to come home. Next time, in a few days, she'll succeed. It's like Jared Keelor told you. There's others, other beings, who are helping her, using her as their conduit to come to this world."

"So even the little gray men are counting on you."

"No, actually, you. It was supposed to be you." He curled in on them, gathering her close to himself. "When you were abducted, they couldn't do it right. The men from the Consortium, the ones who took you, were trying to duplicate the alien experiments without knowing how. It was kind of like doing surgery without anesthetic."

He nudged her hair away from her face so he could look at her profile.

"I'm not sure I completely understand yet. There's something about your abduction, what they did to you, and just the way we are. We have to do this together."

* * *

(cold and stale, like car exhaust in winter, the scent of myself... it's been months since

I could smell anything, why now and what...)

All in a rush, Dana's stomach lurched as she looked down between her orange-clad knees and saw stretches and sprays of blue and white. She heard herself gasp.

* * *

Mulder heard her intake of breath, suddenly, looked down at her wide open eyes. She looked at him for a second as if not recognizing him. He could feel the question coming, but her lips made the wrong motion, the wrong sound.

"Shto dela...?" Scully blinked hard, swallowed, shook her head slightly. "What do we have to do?"

"Make sure she dies, or doesn't come... she's already dead, there's something they do that makes new bodies, new selves. But we can't kill her. I don't know how to explain it. It's in the wrong language."

"Why don't I remember?"

"Everything that's happened to you... they said it was too much already. You were unconscious. Nobody hurt you, nobody even touched you. I think they were sorry."

She shook softly with resigned laughter.

"The little gray men are sorry?"

Mulder's voice was neutral, quiet, reciting the facts.

"They're gone. If they didn't leave... they were afraid the others could use them, possess them, the same way they will the woman in the Vostok."

"Are they coming back?"

"I don't know. I don't think they know."

We could probably drive to North Dakota by the end of the day, if we wanted to have an anniversary of sorts. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. We were

together, we were fighting them, kissing before swinging out into the abyss. Maybe it just slowed us down, made it less easy to dodge when the hammer finally fell.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier, when it happened?" she asked.

"I don't know. I... I don't know if I remembered then. I don't think I'm completely in charge right now." Somehow, that was the answer she'd expected, that she knew to be true.

"Why us, Mulder?"

"I don't know," and he felt that he was lying, though he couldn't say why.

"Why is it always us?"

* * *

Jackson County, South Dakota

6:43 PM

They slept through the afternoon in another motel room, Mulder crashing hard and Scully less so. They wanted to drive in the night, minimize their chances of being seen. Mulder felt as if his internal clock was shut off completely. The past twenty-four hours was like a badly constructed narrative, occasional scenes separated by unexplained gray space, the settings arbitrary and inconsequential.

He wondered if grays could lie, wondered what they would consider a lie. It was clear to him that they'd received a strong suggestion-- a push, he reflected bitterly-- and were following it. They'd been tweaked, altered, to make sure that things would work. He'd tried a variety of experiments on himself, wandering down familiar mental paths. The road to Stonehenge, winter solstice with Scully, 2000, an imagining of the future that had literally kept him alive on one or two occasions, was now ill-defined and uninteresting; he couldn't recall how hard to throw to make it from third to first; couldn't remember the directions to the Vineyard summer house.

He sat on the bed, legs outstretched, hand resting on Scully's hip as she slept. Her sleep was untroubled, he could tell.

Of course it would be; they needed her to drive, needed her strong. He couldn't imagine how angry she would be-- actually he could imagine, and it was a matter of will, not would-- when she realized.

Scully was getting up, going into the bathroom. Time had passed; the sun had set and the room was nearly dark. Have I been asleep too? Mulder wondered. He watched her, stretching up with her back to him as she removed her T-shirt. He loved the lines of her back, the muscles of her shoulders, the enticing sweep to her small waist. The one-sided light from the bathroom spilled around the curved edges of her silhouette to illuminate...

"Scully, wait."

"What?" she responded quietly, turning her head in profile.

"Your tattoo's gone," he said in an oddly neutral tone.

"You're kidding."

"I'm not, look." She turned around, looking over her own shoulder in the bathroom mirror.

"Oh, my God.." The skin was as it had been years ago. The snake had apparently made some headway, caught up with its tail and vanished. Mulder was suddenly kneeling at her side in the small bathroom, his fingers tracing the skin.

"I can see it here, it's like the scarring is still there. I've seen tattoos removed before, but not like this. I think the ink's just been leached out."

"You think they did it?"

He shook his head.

"I've never heard of that before, but I can't think of anything else." He peered at the slightly silvered circle on her skin, looking for some other clue he was certain he wouldn't find. He was conscious of her hand suddenly moving up to the back of her neck.

"Mulder, check my neck," she murmured urgently. He rose, pushing her hair aside. The skin here looked perfectly normal, which it shouldn't; the little surgical scar should be right here, he thought. He knew it, knew it well. He pressed lightly; the implant should be there to the touch, a tiny hard spot.

"Scully, there's nothing here."

"Nothing? Is there any sign of..."

"No, there's no scar, not even the old one, there's nothing, it's all gone." Lacking any better way to deal with this development, Mulder pressed his lips softly to the back of her neck. It was as if he'd suddenly turned a page in his mind, finding the answer. "Wait. It's gone. I know it's gone."

"How do you know?" Their eyes met in the bathroom mirror, him standing behind her. He turns, walking back towards the bed.

"I just do."

"Mulder, what about the cancer...?" she asked, incredulous.

"You don't need it anymore. That's gone too," he replied, sitting down heavily on the edge of the mattress.

"You just know this?"

"Yeah, I do." He pressed his hands together, leaning his face into them. She came forward into the shadowed room, unselfconsciously bare-breasted. The back of her hand brushes against his chest, then rests on his forehead, gauging.

"Mulder, you're running a light fever. How do you feel?" He returns the gesture, fingertips across the upper slope of one breast, then resting his hand on her forehead. She was warm, warmer than usual, her skin dry.

"Probably about like you do," he said. He scooted back on the bed and she lay down as well, on her belly. The light of the bathroom threw them into relief, the wrinkles in his t-shirt tiny mountain ranges, her bare back a broad and gently rolling plain.

They were silent for a moment.

"Do you remember the whole drive here?" Scully asked, her voice tentative in the dark.

"No," he responded. "You?"

"I remember driving," she said carefully.

"Hungry?"

"No. I should be."

"This is in the literature, you know," he began. "Abductees find themselves..." then he chuckled sadly, "...saying really stupid, obvious things." Of course she knows that, he thought. She's got the eponymous X-Files to prove it.

"Find themselves driving to major public works projects in Pennsylvania," she finished for him. It was quiet again. His hand moved into the middle of her back, slowly exploring the unexplained absence.

"When we're done with this, we are refocusing the X-Files, okay?"

"Yeah?" She rolled over on her side to face him, comforted that his eyes strayed immediately to her nakedness.

"Yep," he nodded slowly but determinedly. "We are sticking exclusively to Bigfoot."

"Oh, right, because the woods work out great for us."

"I'll bring sleeping bags," he said, giving her a ghost of a smile. She moved closer, arranging herself to rest her head on his thigh.

"Have there ever been any Bigfoot sightings in Cancun? Can we go to the beach?" She sounded almost wistful.

"There have been multiple corroborated reports of Elvis surfing near San Diego. I don't know if we could get a federal warrant, but..." She rolled over onto her back,

her head still on his thigh. He felt her intake of breath, deep sudden inhale and exhale as her hands came up to cover her face. "Oh, God, Scully..."

"Sorry, honey, my alien hybrid daughter from the first time I was abducted died in San Diego last Christmas. I don't know about San Diego." He heard soft, bitter laughter rather than tears. It was terrifying and unfamiliar, yet fitting. "I just don't fucking know anymore." She rose up, straddling his legs and leaning forward, leaning her forehead against his. A fuzzy line of shadow ran down the middle of her face, dark on one side, light on the other. He imagined her eyes luminous. She began with a deep breath. "Mulder..."

"Yeah?" She held his face in her hands, her eyes closing tightly once to blink back tears.

"I need you to need me," she said in a soft and deathly serious tone. "I will drive you, fly you, carry you, kill for you, anything you need until we're done. You can't question me, you can't ask me how I am, because I'm not okay. Because when we're done, when this is over... I am going to blow into a million pieces, and you're going to have to help me put them all back together, okay?"

His face was distinguished mainly by its ability to convey his emotions through minimal changes, making the depth of sorrow now evident seem almost like a disfigurement. She could see him starting to say her name as he suddenly changed, normal expression returned, his head turning to look towards the window. His eyes seemed to lighten, go far away.

"Mulder?" Oh, God, she thought, watching his lips move, as if speaking a few words to himself. What does he see, how does he know...?

"Scully, get your gun, get in the bathroom, turn out the light, cover your ears hard."

As she scrambled into the bathroom, she considered grabbing for Mulder's shirt where it lay across the bed. Then she realized it might be a useful momentary distraction and stayed partially nude. She saw Mulder crouched behind and below the bed, so if he rose he'd be facing the door. He gestured quickly, pointing at himself, then skimming his hand across the floor towards the opposite wall. She noticed that he had his Sig in his right hand, revolver lying on the floor behind him where either of them could reach it if need be.

Scully heard a scuffling noise outside the front window, then the clatter of glass breaking. She pushed her fists up to her ears, gun in her right hand.

Mulder couldn't describe what it sounded like. There was just the beginning of something and then his ears rang, drowning out everything else. He could tell there'd been a flash on the floor on the other side of the bed, his vision protected. He heard two dull pops over the ringing, realized Scully was firing through the window from behind him and he rolled sideways, collapsing his knee and falling onto his side

this better work or I am a sitting duck

his upper body emerged from the cover of the bed as the door came fully open, a body crouching with its hands pointing forward and up. Mulder fired instinctively, three times, saw the body fall backwards. He scrambled back behind the bed. Scully ducked around the bathroom doorframe as low as she could, and their eyes met. Mulder mouthed "count thirteen" and she pulled behind the doorframe again.

She'd counted Mississippis ever since hide-and-seek, but she knew Mulder was a one-one-thousand man and counted along like that, feeling the connection. Thirteen was a Mulder idea, comforting now that she followed it, if someone else counted ten we'd get to react to them and if they were counting fifteen we'd get the drop...

Two-one-thousand

She's okay, she's okay, she's okay. Are there more? These guys always seem to come in twos, you can't travel in a group of more than two without it getting to be a hassle

Three-one-thousand

That was stupid, standing like that in the window with the motel sign behind him, I think I hit him twice, one in the neck or head for sure

four-one-thousand

She's okay. Scully will probably scoot around behind me, up to the head of the bed and peek up from there. I'll go out where I did before, no one saw that move except

s o k o l

the guy I shot and Scully, and she'll expect me to do it again

Five-one-thousand

He's all right. I might be able to get out this bathroom window but he couldn't.

Six-one-thousand

Osselhoff. Last man I shot was Scott Osselhoff. Except the guy yesterday.

seven-one-thousand

tattoo's gone, where did it go, Mulder will probably go right again so I'll go left to the head of the bed, I can probably fit under it if I need to

eight-one-thousand

Osselhoff. KITT, I need you! Their car or ours? They must be looking for ours. How did they know? What did we do wrong, what did we do wrong, think like Langly...

nine-one-thousand

Mulder will have to drive if we bug out under fire, I'm a better shot and my night vision's better

ten-one-thousand

Oh, God, what do I do if they hit her, I'm not a doctor, she's the doctor and she's so small a bullet would rip her apart there's a certain symbolic elegance to it all if she dies now, chip-talisman NO

eleven-thousand

if there were more, they'd have pulled the guy at the door out, he's in the way, no way out except the front door, maybe they'd leave him

twelve-one-thousand

NO she is alive and wait there's no one else here, I don't feel anyone

thirteen-thousand

heart rate's down a little. How did he know? How did he know? I don't want to do this. I want to call for backup. I want to stop.

* * *

Seattle, Washington

Thursday, 4 June, 1998

1143AM

Angelo Veccione's offices were the same everywhere, the smoker thought. Or, more properly, they weren't. They were always someone else's, "a friend's." Here he appeared to have taken over the manager's office in a deceptively cheerful-looking real estate concern. He could have something more impressive or secure, but his clients, his connections, were people who did business face to face. They valued respect and personal contact. Angelo signed Christmas cards, had one of his assistants keep track of birthdays. They'd worked together for decades, and he knew that Angelo was sensitive about discussing his connections overtly even with someone as close as they had been. He would simply say that he had a lot of friends.

Angelo rose up from his friend's desk, nodding at his man standing by the door to leave them alone. His demeanor was different in private, breaking not infrequently into smiles, and given to an occasional expansive Mediterranean gesture of the hands.

"I'm glad you're here. Why don't we go get something nice to eat, we'll be stuck up in the woods all weekend."

"No, Angelo, but thank you."

"Can I offer you a drink, at least?" Angelo didn't wait for an affirmative, opened a cabinet behind the desk and began pouring some of his friend's Scotch. He gave the smoker a glass and looked out the wide window of the office, a dozen stories up. "I should apologize," he said.

"For what?" the smoker responded, leading him.

"For what happened."

"I would have done the same to you under the circumstances." The smoker smiled. "You never know, I still might." He didn't touch his drink. His health was always on a narrow edge these days; bullets in the chest tended to do that. Angelo looked disappointed, faraway for a moment.

"We've come a long way, haven't we?"

The smoker set his untouched drink on the corner of the desk.

"Keith's making the wrong decision," he began, walking up behind Angelo. "He has always been too enamored of fighting the good fight. Besides, his men are scientists, engineers. They frequently confuse what could be with what really is."

"You operate within the military, the bureaucracies, structures of power. Perhaps your ability to think creatively has been inhibited." Angelo turned and took his seat behind the desk again. "The vaccine may have worked once, but that's not a weapon. It's a defense, a bargaining chip at best. Unless you know something."

"I don't think we have all the relevant information. This... woman, this ghost, and what she brings. It may not be something we can control."

"You've been speaking to Pandhu," Angelo said.

"Of course." The smoker made a dismissive gesture with the tip of his cigarette. "I try to keep an open mind, until a course of action is clear. You should know that."

"At the Trinity test," Angelo said, "the first atomic bomb, some of the world's greatest physicists, men who had worked on the Manhattan Project, were placing wagers on whether or not the test would set off a spontaneous fusion reaction in the atmosphere-- destroying the entire world. Risks must be taken."

"In 1944," the smoker responded, "some Allied generals counseled an armistice with Germany in order to turn the combined forces of the West against Stalin. The

opportunity was there, but to take it would not have been wise. It would, however, have been very creative."

Angelo nodded in acknowledgment, but shrugged.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I think we need to reopen this matter," the smoker replied. "We should hear Pandhu out. We should certainly retract the Protocol Seven orders."

"Based on our knowledge, these courses of action are mutually exclusive." The fat man was back in his meeting mask, unblinking. "If the cosmonaut is here, then the persons on the Protocol Seven lists may pose a danger."

"If we carry out Protocol Seven, then all of our research, all of the work will have been for naught." Angelo heard an unusual sincerity in the smoker's voice. "We will be destroying our own laboratory, and burning the records of our experiments. It's ridiculous."

"Risks must be taken," the moray mouth replied. The smoker leaned forward onto the desk, then realized it was pointless. He turned away from the fat man, taking his turn to look out the window at the spread of harbor below.

"So it's all to come down to one throw of the dice, then." He studied the tip of his cigarette. "Abandon everything we have worked for, so Keith can try to live out his Nelsonian fantasies, save the realm?"

"A decision's been made, old friend." Angelo looked away, concentrating on a spot on the wall.

"Did you know I'm a father, Angelo? I have two sons."

"I didn't know that."

"Well, the work. They hardly know me."

"I imagine you've done what you can."

* * *

"How did you know?" she shouted over the engine's frantic growl and whine, the ferocious ringing still in her ears.

Scully had fired an AK-47 on a course once, seen its wounds in an autopsy bay. She wanted one now, with its huge man-killing, car-shredding round. That gun would laugh at a car, the metal body just making the bullet tumble so the entry wound would be a ragged crater, the target dying of shock.

"I don't know!" he yelled back. "It's just happening!"

She almost wanted to see lights behind them. It would be an SUV, top-heavy and full of soft black-clad bodies with spines that snap and organs that rupture. Skulls meant to protect against the occasional branch or in extremis the claw of a cheetah, not pavement at ninety miles an hour. She knew she could hit a tire at a range that would surprise the faceless casualties as they felt the vehicle skew, the front end digging in and sparks flying as the vehicle's fatal roll began.

Pain lanced into her head, dancing across her brows and arcing to the base of her skull. She recoiled from herself, from the chattering voice in her head that wanted to see things split open.

"Mulder, something's wrong..."

"It's okay. It's... they can't get to you anymore. You'll be okay."

* * *

The smoker cornered Krycek against a wall. He had two men with him, just as Alex did. The temporary Seattle locations had turned into Mafia hideouts, everyone who was worth it with their own bodyguards. Krycek knew he was outmatched. His men weren't quite certain enough of things yet to stare down the man they called Smokey.

"What the hell kind of operation are you running, Alex?" The smoker held up a fax, a half-dozen pages. There were crime scene photos on them, turned into monochrome cartoons. A petite woman slumped over the steering wheel of an SUV. Blood

spattered onto the starred windshield from the inside. The bullet had come from behind her, obviously taking a large chunk of her face with it on the way out. Further photos illustrated this in some detail.

"Her husband died on the operating table," the smoker noted.

"Probably gang-related," Krycek shrugged.

"There is no room for these kind of mistakes! There never has been!"

"Actually, yes, there is. It's called acceptable losses."

"I was deciding what acceptable losses were before you were a load that should have been swallowed, you little fuck."

"Call it evolution," Krycek smirked.

"It's not too late for you to get out of here before you're completely out of your depth, Alex."

"You too." None of the four bodyguards was quite certain, after the fact, which of the two men had drawn first. There was a loud rustle of fabric and safeties snapping on both sides, and Alex Krycek and the smoker glared at each other over their sights. Krycek's gun wavered slightly below the older man's eye socket. The other pointed directly between Alex's eyes and just above the bridge of his nose.

Alex smiled.

"You know what's coming, old man."

"And you don't, Alex."

"I'm going to enjoy this when it happens."

"Another time, then." the smoker said. This was right, he thought. Reducing things to their fundamental elements, to finality, to violence. The others don't know how to play this game, he thought, as Krycek and his men walked away shrugging their jackets into place like a bunch of young toughs. They can order violence, murder,

they believe they can direct it. A flea believes he can control a wolf because he can make the wolf scratch.

* * *

April Air Force Base
California
August 1979

It was the longest the doctor had ever seen him go without bringing a cigarette to his lips. He had stood for nearly three minutes in the hospital corridor, silent, not looking into the patient's room. It was not that he was expressionless in that time, but that the expressions were unreadable.

"You're certain?" the man finally asked.

"Yes. It's a matter of days at most. There's just not enough... her immune system's completely broken down. If it's not this secondary infection, it'll be another one, or it'll be the residual toxicity from the last round of test procedures. We just don't know enough about the hybrid metabolism yet. I'm sorry."

"Let her go," he said. He waited a moment as if he might have had something else to say and then thought the better of it. He walked away down the hospital corridor, hands beginning automatic motions of fire and smoke.

The girl was fourteen, would have been lovely if not for her pallor, if not for the papery, deathly translucency of her skin, if not for the dark tracings of veins visible nearly everywhere. The respirator had been removed early that afternoon, and weak lungs continued out of habit and the bloody-minded persistence of life. The breaths were a tiny fraction shallower every time, each heartbeat a few milliseconds further from the last. It had been coldly noted that this was an expected reaction of the hybrid metabolism. It was trying to slip into a hibernative coma, slowing the rate of failure and hoping for cool preserving temperatures. They'd tried that with a previous subject, unsuccessfully, and there was no point prolonging this experiment.

It wasn't out of pure heartlessness that her body was alone; the shutdown of some hybrid metabolisms had on occasion proved volatile. She was observed from a distance, but such family as she had had already made its final observances.

The heart the hybrid metabolism expected was a product of a different ecosystem, capable of maintaining a steady rhythm at a glacial pace, but the heart it sent rigidly ordered, alien instructions to was of human stock. During the night it reached its limit, the achingly slow, shallow beats becoming a weak and failing flutter. It was at this point that the girl's eyes opened. They too had once been lovely. The hazel irises were now washed out in blooms of greenish blood.

She was beyond pain, but it still would have been a surprise to any who had been close enough to see her poor eyes brighten and her pale cracked un-kissed lips part, moving slightly. If they had, it would have been marked down to a final kind of delusion, all the more so as one near-inaudible word was formed.

"Fox..."

Some distances away, a man curled up in the passenger seat of a car pulled over to the side of a road. Dawn was about to break, grayish light cast over him and the woman on the driver's side. She dozed, a beautiful face showing faintly worn lines of concern. The man's eyes were open, bright with tears, and his arms were held tight across his chest in a child's gesture.

"Samantha..."

* * *

Montana

Thursday, 4 June 1998

After dawn

Scully felt as though she had slept for a few hours, waking with the seat back as far as it would go. She didn't remember stopping, didn't remember what the last point on the highway had been. Detachedly she realized it would be beautiful, driving through mountains. Could we come back some day? She stretched her arms out in front of her, listening to her joints crack, then found a bottle of water in the map pocket inside her door. She didn't remember putting it there, or drinking the first half of it. It was cool and flat tasting, but better than she'd prepared herself for. Scully had the strangest sense of unfulfilled *deja vu*, something to do with awful, tepid water that tasted simultaneously of metal and rubber.

Her lover's long body was uncomfortably jumbled in the seat beside her. Mulder was speaking to his own dreams, insensible. She had a flash of trying to wake him while it was still dark, but he would rouse only for moments at a time and would not speak, only gaze at her.

She'd seen the sunrise in her own dream, preceded by an arc of crackling flashes, clearly defined bands of color over a black curved horizon. She'd seen this picture before. This was sunrise from space. She was cold, so impossibly cold.

Ete kholod...

They had flown over the highway through the previous night, checking the radio occasionally to find out if they were officially fugitives yet. Their ears still rang, and they jabbered frantically back and forth at high volume in the dark. Being on the run after a firefight was not something they'd covered in the Academy, especially if you were on the Bobbie Sue and Billy Joe side of the equation.

Then the radio started being funny, and Scully noted that Montana's Jesus sounded very, very Protestant. Mulder wondered aloud why the worldwide Jewish conspiracy wasn't doing him any damn good lately. A charming local lunatic, his Radio Shack microphone busting into overdriven blare, recommended to aim for the head "when the FBI come for you like they did in Texas and North Dakota." Scully chewed her lip and closed her eyes briefly, nonetheless pushing Montana's "reasonable and prudent" to a ninety-mile-per-hour extreme.

"This isn't my usual after-action response," Mulder had noted. Scully had agreed. They were both brooders.

"Something's giving us an endorphin rush," he'd continued. "Trying to cheer us up, keep us going. Good human doggies." His hand had pounded the inside of the door.

"Mulder, we're both exhausted, we're probably just... freaking out," she'd finished lamely. She was distracted, her limbs feeling strong and sinuous, her mind giddily preoccupied with feelings of power, awareness of her weapons.

"No, this is part of it," he'd said, leaning forward, his head against the dash. "This is probably their idea of doing us a favor-- keep us partially aware, throw us a cookie

when we stay on track." He'd looked over at her, saw her squirming in her seat. "Don't fight it, it just gets stronger."

It just gets stronger, she thought, as she looked at the state highway rolling by. Mulder was speaking, and it had snapped her to awareness, at least of an intellectual sort. She didn't think driving was going to require any conscious input from her.

"Scully?" His voice was insistent; he'd been trying to get her attention.

* * *

"Hey..." I answer.

"Do you know how long a million years is, Scully?"

"What do you mean?"

"I do... I know what it looks like from the outside. It's curved, it's the outside of a sphere, it just looks flat from where we are. We're points, we just move forward on top of time. The other ones, the ones from the other side, the ones inside of her, they're lines. They don't begin and they don't end. They're left over from before." Mulder's eyes have a terrifying intensity, and when he speaks it reminds me of the primal nature of his intelligence, the raw genius at the base of his mind, and the thin boundary between genius and madness.

"Things that man was not meant to know," he says, smiling weakly and rubbing at his eyes. "We have to keep moving. I think I'm carrying something."

He's sitting straight up now, his eyes bright.

"They're using me to transmit information somehow. I don't think I can carry it for too long."

"What kind of information?"

"I can't explain. It's like they balled up the entire Encyclopedia Galactica in a condom and I swallowed it, and it's starting to leak." He chuckled. "I'm sorry, Scully."

I was going to ask what for, then I realized how silly that would sound.

"I'm sorry too, Mulder."

He's quiet for about a minute, obviously trying to decide where to take that.

"What are you sorry for?"

"I'm sorry that we're here."

Probably two minutes. I see Mulder having an entire conversation with himself.

"I'm serious, Scully... the passports, the money, everything. We do this thing, this... it's not too clear to me yet, and then they'll let us go. Let's go, beautiful, let's go somewhere with no guns and no Morley cigarettes and no Alex Kryceks and I'll name all the stars for you... you probably know them all already but I think I might know some new ones now."

"Could you really stop?" I shouldn't ask him serious questions. He's half-delirious. Hell, so am I.

"I need to. I don't know what to believe anymore, and I don't think it matters whether I believe or not. I find one truth, it gets taken away, replaced with another. Maybe they erase my memories, maybe I invent them." He pauses. "Right now I remember being in an alien spaceship. Right now I can say they were this far from me, Scully," he holds up his hands a foot apart, "this far. Maybe tomorrow it'll be a secret military aircraft and rubber alien suits and hypnosis again. Next week I'll be trying to convince you I was on Santa's goddamn sleigh and there were these tiny little fucking reindeer."

"And at the same time, I know we have to go to Washington looking for a ghost spaceship, because there's something we need to do that's more important than anything else, and every time I start to realize what it is, it slips away. It's like someone's playing a shell game in my head. What if I'm just going crazy, Scully, what if I'm just going crazy and it's going to get us both killed?"

I realize that I don't need to drive, not with the same part of me that's listening to Mulder. That's being taken care of. This is a discussion we should have lying down,

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looking up, somewhere quiet with grass under our backs and clouds scudding overhead.

"You're not going crazy. I believe you, Mulder, I believe that we are here, now, for a purpose because I have to. It has to matter."

(we're holding hands between us, and I tap our twined fingers in the soft grass to make the point)

"I understand something now." He turns his head to face me (I can feel the slight movement from his other hand pulling up random blades of grass and rolling them between his fingers), looking giddy and rueful at the same time. "Souls, Scully baby, we're old, old souls..."

"What do you mean?"

"A base pair, Scully, we're a base pair. Out of all the original group, thousands, the whole... there's only us left. Two souls. Everyone else has accomplished what they were supposed to do, and they've moved on."

He's silent for a few seconds (turning his face back up to the sky).

"She's dead, Scully. Samantha's dead. I saw her die. I think she knew I was there. She's moved on now. That's how it works... it's learning, completing yourself, over lifetimes and lifetimes and lifetimes... Samantha finished. She's gone."

"What are we supposed to learn, Mulder?"

"I think we're completing something. In all our lives, we have always been around each other, but we have never been like this. We've never been together. It's the final configuration. Last trip around. Wow. We're really, really cool." It's that giddy smile again.

"You're saying this was destiny, Mulder?"

He focuses then, the smile gone and facing me again.

"No, it's just the only way it can end." He pauses, thinking. "I don't know what lives

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we lived. I just know how the system works, because they knew. I can see it on our skins. When I look at you I realize that I'm looking at myself, at the future. Oh, Scully." Mulder's eyes open wide, his lips moving slightly as if talking to himself.

"Mulder? Mulder!"

"I'm getting it now. I had to know what they are, how they came to be, so I can help the cosmonaut. I've got something for her, Scully. Something she needs to move on. Something you need."

"Something I need?"

"That's why this is so wrong, that's why this is happening. She can't be here, because she's already here. Scully, she's you."

In this moment, isolated, more conscious of the imagined scent of grass than of the real stale air in the car, it makes sense.

"Something will happen, Scully, it's... it's beyond our control this time. Just keep going, close to where she'll be. We'll know what to do. We have to."

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Seattle FBI Office

10:14 AM PST

"We got something!" Skinner looked up at the sound of Spender's voice. It was the only favor Skinner had left to call in the Pacific Northwest. One of the Seattle ASACs, Paul Richards, had been a drinking buddy in the early Eighties. That connection had gotten them an empty desk and a land line, a computer with an Internet connection, and not too many questions.

"What?"

Spender was combing through daily updates from field offices. Skinner was cold-calling state highway patrols under a variety of pretenses.

"Minneapolis Bureau got a call from a county sheriff's office in the ass end of South Dakota wondering what the FBI is doing in his jurisdiction. Eyewitnesses reported a shootout at a motel in Davison County and a bunch of guys in black SUVs claiming to be FBI agents... it's them, it's gotta be them." Spender smacked down the fax paper on the shared desk.

"What?" Skinner, on hold, put his hand over the mouthpiece of the receiver. He saw

Richards leaving his office and waved him over.

"Eyewitnesses say that there were two alleged FBI men shot dead, both definitely men," Spender emphasized. "Bodies were removed by the alleged FBI before the county sheriff arrived, county sheriff calls the FBI in Minneapolis. They, of course, don't know what the fuck he's talking about."

"Anybody see the shooter?"

"No. Light-colored hatchback heading west on I-90 might have been the shooter."

"Time?"

"Nine-thirty PM last night."

"Anyone looking for that car?" Skinner asked, giving up on the Wyoming highway patrol and hanging up. Spender was flipping rapidly through a road atlas they'd borrowed from the office, Richards looking over his shoulder.

"You ever been to South Dakota?" the younger man asked. "Four hours out from there," he slid the map in front of Skinner, "they could be anywhere in four states, and they're not going to stay on the interstates if they think they're being followed." Spender's brow wrinkled for a second, looking at the map. "Wait, no they can't."

Skinner nodded.

"They're coming to Washington, right?" Spender continued. "You can't just blow west through Montana, you have to go through Billings and Butte. Or they go all the way through Wyoming... No. They're still gonna have to go through Butte or Missoula. Northern Idaho doesn't have back roads unless you're a goat, and not if you're in a hurry." He noticed Skinner looking at him curiously. "My mom and I moved around a lot when I was a teenager. I lived in northern Wyoming for a little while."

"How much of a hurry are they in?" Richards asked. He was a tough customer, more of a cop than an agent, with too much of a tendency to say exactly what he was thinking to advance past his current station.

"They're probably trying to be in Olympic National Forest somewhere by Friday night, but I'm not sure they know exactly." Skinner said quietly and evenly. "They may be kind of making things up as they go along. They're damn good agents but they're ...unconventional."

"What do you mean by that?" Richards asked carefully. "Look, Walt, there's fuck-all we can do about this unless you want the whole thing to go public. If I saw that fax from South Dakota any other day I'd file it with the black helicopter sightings and forget about it, let Minneapolis worry about it. I mean, I can call Minneapolis and suggest they send somebody out to South Dakota, but that'll take a day at least. They'll probably just tell me to fuck off anyway."

The heavysset Seattle ASAC looked around the room and lowered his voice.

"I can put an APB out to state highway patrols if you can promise me your people aren't gonna go Bonnie and Clyde if someone tries to pull them over."

Skinner rubbed his forehead, glancing at Spender. Richards nodded at the two men and gave them the privacy he sensed they were hoping for.

"You think something's trying to take Scully again?" Spender asked quietly. "Like Ruskin Dam? Like my mother?"

"If Mulder thinks that's happening he's probably handcuffed to her right now, and he's not going to be stopping for state highway patrols."

Spender exhaled and studied his shoes for a moment.

"Sir, have we considered the possibility that we're missing an ally here?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Big Tobacco said he was trying to keep Mulder and Scully alive, assuming he's not lying. Besides, that South Dakota thing wasn't him."

"You're probably right. A straight-up hit like that is not his style, especially one that doesn't work. What's your point?"

"You and I might have a lead here he doesn't know about. He may have the resources to try and sweep them up if he knows where to look."

"Are you saying we should cooperate with him? Hand them over to him?"

"An approach might not hurt. I don't see what else we have right now. At least then we'd know where they are."

"You're thinking a little too far outside the box, Spender." Skinner tried hard not to snarl, but he could feel his jaw tightening as he said it. Spender looked frustrated.

"Sir, with all due respect, have you got a better idea?"

"You don't have the experience to be dealing with people like him on even terms." Skinner glared at a passing Seattle agent who wasn't minding quite enough of his own business. "He'll feed you your balls before you know what's happening. You've already got the wrong people interested in your career."

"I don't have much of a choice in that. Maybe I can work it to my advantage."

Skinner snorted.

"Don't end up like me, Jeff. There's always a price."

* * *

"Do you remember how we got here?" she asked quietly, her finger tracing a vertical pattern in the condensation on the outside of the paper cup. She couldn't remember what was inside. Probably water-- the impulses were thus far ruthlessly practical.

"I think so." Mulder pulled the lid off his cup, looked inside. Water. He was afraid to unwrap his burger. He probably hadn't thought of bacon or cheese. Christ, what if they were vegetarians? He almost giggled.

"Honestly." The truck stop looked as if it had grown in a modular fashion, absorbing formerly independent buildings as it went. A gas station here, a diner there, a pathetic motel, all given the same paint job. The diner's front wall was entirely glass-- filthy glass-- and the dull gray skies outside announced that they were now

officially in the Pacific Northwest.

"No. I have no idea." He sighed, rested his elbows on the table. "It's getting worse. I'm waiting for a craving for sweet potato pie."

"Yeah." She didn't take the bait. He reached across the table, enfolding her small hands in his without looking around first.

"Scully... look. I can't explain how I know this, but I do. It's going to be all right. I can see, Scully, you don't die." She looked away from him, out the glass separating them from the parking lot.

"So that's what constitutes a good day now? What about you?"

"I don't know how to explain," he began. "I see it... for me, it's without the breaks, without my own... changes. I wouldn't know. It's... it's irrelevant from the point of view I have."

"It's not irrelevant to me."

"I know I don't die because you don't."

They were silent long enough for Scully to drink half her water. Mulder wondered if it was a sign of rebellion to leave his burger untouched.

"I'm not afraid, Mulder. I don't know why. I'm more curious than anything else. Does this end tomorrow? Are we going to wake up and find ourselves in the Arctic next week? Are we going to find ourselves at all?"

"I don't know."

"What if this is it, Mulder? This parking lot? What if this is the last thing I remember?"

* * *

The room is small and not clean, meant for a single dead-tired trucker on a tight schedule. The bed is some weird size between single and double, the carpet dusty

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except for a strip of half-assed daily vacuuming, the television bolted to the wall on a steel bracket. The door slams and Scully's small hand fumbles the bolt shut as two large hands lift her up, her strong thighs clasp around his hips as she is lifted to six-feet-plus, face-to-face altitude.

Never done this, he's thinking, never lifted Scully up like this, clothed, against the wall, to feel her squirming and pressing and tearing at our clothes.

She imagines she can feel their hearts pounding together as they press close, hammering from behind ribs.

He holds her up like this with his hand on her bare, warming back as she pulls her T-shirt over her head, fingertips scraping against the absurdly low ceiling. Everything has to happen at once and it's not working, everything's in the way, they want to look into each other's eyes, to kiss, to get her bra off, to be everywhere in each other at the same time.

His hands are on her face as she rides on top, tracing the fine bones of her skull and the joining points where she's sensitive-- scalp to forehead, ear to cheek, throat to jaw. He wants to touch everything once, be certain to remember every inch so he could shape her blind from river clay and kiss her to life. She won't close her eyes, not for a moment, not to blink away these goddamn tears or anything.

His big hands are on her breasts, palms circling on her nipples, sliding down her sides. He loves her round calves, her little ankles. He's told her so, and they both remember and smile as his hands encircle her there. She's saying his names, both of them, even the one he hates to hear. He does it too, serious, afraid that in her name he almost never says there might be some part of her that he doesn't know yet.

Inside, he thinks, I'm inside Scully, she's surrounding me. She leans forward and her face is filled with a sweet and knowing sadness, eyes closing as her cheek presses against his chest. He feels the wetness of tears against his breast but her body doesn't stop its sinuous, desperate motion. Her hips roll back and forth, drawing her up and down his length.

Their bodies continue to move, rocking with gentle urgency. Her seashell liquidity envelops him, shared heat and tension building.

what's going to happen?

I don't know, Scully, I don't know

they won't let us stop

we can't, if we don't do this everything ends

I want to remember this time, Mulder, I won't let them take this

no, this is ours, we're, oh God, Scully

He feels it hit her as she gasps with something that sounds like surprise and they slip back to singular unities as the urgent coals burst aflame. As her body pulses around him he releases as well, thrusting upwards deep inside her. Scully begins to speak, to urge him, but her voice trails off in a ragged whimper as she feels the unmistakable push and throb of her lover's release inside her.

Stirred alive a last time, the embers light with a stunning and violent brilliance. Bright trails of sparks flare in the night sky before darkness closes in.

* * *

Langly stands on the front step, waiting for the police and the useless ambulance. Inside, Frohike sits on the floor, one leg tucked under him, head lolled forward and sobbing. Byers is crouched behind him, arms around the smaller man's shoulders in a strange pose for any other time.

He's angry with her. He had never known Scully to be impatient, but in the end she hadn't even kept to her own plans. In the kitchen of the little rented cottage is a plastic grocery bag with small, solid apple-bulges visible; she'd initially planned for one night, anyway, maybe a morning walk down to the beach and a swim (no, she wouldn't do that to her mother, would want the body found), but that had apparently fallen by the wayside. Damn her, Byers thinks, we'd have been here by then, it took about ten minutes after she left the graveside service for her story to fall apart and twenty to trace her credit card to this rental. Beside the grocery bag is a bottle of red wine, a smaller bottle of vodka, and four prescription bottles, neatly lined up. She'd moved up her own schedule there, it appeared. On the couch beside

her is a small box. He hadn't gone to look like Frohike had, but he could see from here photos, handwriting. Most of them are still neatly piled in the box, only two or three removed and placed on the table in front of her.

If she'd even gone through them all we still might have made it, Byers thinks. I would have frozen, tried to talk, but Mel or Ringo would have dove for her. She would have had a defensive reflex, and it would have been a sorry sight as she punched probably Frohike in the face but he still threw himself on top of her, and Langly ripped that bastard silver Sig out of her hand and skated it down the hardwood hallway.

* * *

"Skinner."

"Where are you, Walter?"

"I'm on vacation, Dean."

"Good. Seen anyone I know?"

"Mickey Mouse, and Goofy. I'm in Disneyland."

"I heard you might be visiting friends in Seattle."

"Of course not. I'm in line for cotton candy as we speak. What's going on?"

"There's been some developments here. Somebody from one of the other three-letters has gone to a Federal Court judge and adopted the two pros that Mr. and Mrs. Spooky shot."

"What do you mean?"

"They're claiming it was a legal search under a counterintelligence warrant. Classified documents of some kind? I may have mentioned this before? Does this sound at all familiar?"

"Possibly."

"Yeah, anyway, I realize you're on vacation, but if you see them getting on Space Mountain, tell them that they've gone from a very beatable manslaughter to a possible federal murder one."

"That's bullshit, Dean."

"There may be two more dead federal employees in South Dakota, though apparently it's sensitive because the agency in question may have been interpreting their jurisdiction very, very liberally... Walter?"

"Yeah, I'm still here."

"If these assholes get all the right paperwork together, Mulder and Scully could be really fucked when they come up for air."

"I hear you."

"Say hi to Mickey."

Skinner killed the call on his phone, certain that Schoen had nothing to add that he really needed to hear. He looked around his hotel room and wished he had a real bottle-- getting a buzz from the minibar would have required too much mixing.

He'd liked to have kissed Scully once, just to find out what it was like. He wasn't sure if he'd ever really wanted her, or if his protective instincts were just to prove he could save something, do something that added up to a net positive no matter how dirty his hands got. He hated that about Mulder, hated about himself that he did, that Mulder had never had to compromise himself to save anything.

Then he realized how full of shit he was to say that and wished for a bottle again. He weighed the phone in his hand and put it on the room's desk. Two minutes later he was in the hotel's lobby, on the probably-not-wiretapped pay phone, dialing a number he'd committed to memory and rarely had occasion to use.

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"She was sick, Scully. They made her so sick and weak. She wasn't afraid any more, she was just so tired."

Scully had tried to catch herself out, to look for the sun before thinking of where it would be, but there it was. Maybe Mulder had put it there, she thought. The hills, the grass, they were probably his too. She'd have put in an ocean.

"I think I spoke to her. I tried, I told her to sleep, told her I was there, that I'd take care of her. I didn't think it would work. It was one thing to know that moment was there in her life, to know what happened, but then I was there, with her."

The physics of it were impeccable; the grass warmed by the sun, but the ground cool under her back.

"I saw Samantha die, Scully. I was there."

If she concentrated, though, or perhaps stopped concentrating, she could feel the steering wheel in her hands.

"How?"

He was half-sitting, leaning back on his elbows as she looked over at him. He had the faraway look she recognized; he hadn't thought of how to put whatever he was about to say into words before.

"Everyone else... all the other souls we're with. I can see them anytime, anyplace, past or... future, too. But it's not the future. It's hard to explain. Whatever I'm doing, time's irrelevant."

"That doesn't make sense." Her words seemed harsh enough to settle between them, crushing the grass with their shape. "Sorry, I'm doing my default response. It does, in purely theoretical terms of viewing the totality of finite space and time as an external observer."

"Is that possible?"

"Well, at that level, if you allow for sufficient abstraction of the admittedly theoretical physics involved to permit the existence of such an external observer,

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who does not have a physical or temporal frame of reference that can be objectively described, virtually anything's possible."

"It does make sense. It's the souls that matter, that's what I can see. It's the souls that continue. We exist outside the universe but live within it."

"That's not inconsistent with any number of theologies, including ones drawn in crayon."

"That's why they're so dangerous; there's no place for them here. They can't exist here without destroying something."

"Can anything, at some level? Metabolic processes, oxidation, radioactive decay."

"I see what you mean. But they're souls that... it's so hard to explain. This isn't their universe anymore."

"Ia Cthulhu ftagn?" Scully intoned, a rare intentional silliness.

"I always wondered how you pronounced that." She could tell he was smiling, though she was now watching clouds. "No, it's... they're like her/you. They're here already." She could hear the smile disappear, turn thoughtful.

Elephant. No, trilobite. She tried concentrating/deconcentrating again, wondering about the steering wheel. She felt the cold worst on her face, her skin so dry she thought it would crack off in sheets like ice, and in her thighs that felt like long lumps of frozen dough. She'd tried to keep moving, every fifteen minutes, but she had no clock, kept losing track, couldn't count, and when she did move she would start shivering all over. When the light comes into the capsule again, check the attitude first, make certain we are not tumbling, carefully twist the radio wires together, remember it all because the ones who follow me, the second woman, the seventh, they will need to know these things...

"They're the Colonists, from before. Or the future, depending on how you look at it."

Her breath caught in two throats in three places at once.

"You okay?" he asked gently. Touching doesn't seem to be part of the game here, she

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thought, normally he would but we are not where we are. "Scully?" Did she see him, here, or was she in the car? He must know, be able to tell us apart.

"I wonder if this is what it was like for me before," she said carefully, forcing down the tremble in her voice, "when I took Cassandra to Ruskin Dam. I wonder if I was alone. I wonder if I'll remember this."

"Memory seems to be infinitely changeable. You're not questioning how we're here, having this conversation?"

"I already know there's no plausible explanation." She'd pulled up a few blades of grass, studied them. Dirt. Perfectly good dirt. We have our very own earth. Grow carrots, tomatoes. "Besides, I don't really want to know."

"When do we go back?" Scully said after a while. The cloud-trilobite had stretched out into a long, striated span of muscle fiber.

"Whenever we want, I guess."

"I suppose we have to."

"This time, yeah."

* * *

Seattle, Washington
Waterfront district
4:39 PM

"All right, name your price," Skinner growled, looking uncomfortably around the warehouse office. It was dingy green-gray and would have smelled of smoke anyway, but the man he was meeting appeared to have had time for one cigarette already.

"Price for what?" the smoker asked with a hint of amusement. He'd seated himself behind the old, cheap desk, the chair squeaking at the slightest movement. Skinner gave him a look of disgust.

"Mulder and Scully."

"I don't have them." The smoker laughed outright this time. Under the single overhead light he looked almost unnaturally healthy, much more than Skinner would admit him a right to. "I may soon. I wish I did. It would be a lot simpler for everyone."

"We might have information to help you locate them. You're protecting them from someone, aren't you. The rest of the country club?"

"Mr. Skinner, it might surprise you to know that I have other things to do than act as guardian angel for people who are, at best, occasionally useful to me. But, nonetheless..." He rose from the chair and reached inside his jacket, pulling out an envelope and offering it to Skinner.

"There's a map in here. Be at the location indicated tomorrow at dawn and wait four hours." Skinner took the envelope as the smoker paused. He seemed oddly informal, as if he'd allowed Skinner behind the wizard's curtain. "If Mulder and Scully don't appear, assume that they are dead. No tricks, no catches, no price. I can't do anything more."

"Care to explain?"

"They'll be coming to me, if they haven't already." The smoker shrugged. "They don't really have a choice. If everything happens as planned, they'll be free to go."

"Except for the murder charges. Those yours?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I said they'd be free to go. What happens after that will be up to them."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If I wanted them dead, they'd be dead. But we're entering dangerous times. The lower profile they keep, the better for everyone."

"How do you plan to sell Mulder on that?"

"Oh, that'll your problem, Mr. Skinner, if indeed it's a problem at all. After everything that's happened I don't know if they'll want to be... tied down. Exposed. You never know what might come through your window. I certainly didn't." The smoker turned to leave. Skinner raised his voice slightly, tried a tone of threat.

"What if I said I had information about your project here in Washington? Information that might go public?"

The smoker barely paused, and stopped just short of chuckling.

"I'd say you should have thought of that angle before, planned your lie better." Skinner felt his face burn with embarrassment. He tried again.

"If Mulder isn't working on the X-Files, what kind of leverage do you have against the rest of the Consortium?"

"Who says I'll need any?" The smoker sounded almost jolly as he descended the metal staircase to the darkened warehouse floor.

* * *

Skinner's first thought was that he must be slipping. He heard loud footsteps behind him as he stepped off the metal stairs down from the warehouse office, spun rapidly, reached for his weapon.

"What the hell was that? What did you have to talk to him about?" Spender stepped out from a shadowed area, gestured towards the partially open door of the warehouse. Skinner felt momentarily sick as the adrenaline dissipated.

"Jesus, Spender. How did you get here? Did you follow me?"

"So, what, you suddenly decided it was okay to think outside the box?" The young agent was red-faced, angry.

"I'm already compromised, Jeff. I'm already dirty. One more roll in the mud isn't going to hurt me like it would hurt you."

"I need to know this shit! I'm not just some rookie agent here. They've got my

mother, for God's sake."

"That's why you went along with Krycek in the first place, isn't it."

"Yes, it is. Fuck." Spender stared at his shoes for a moment, calming himself. "I wasn't sure it was legit right from the beginning. But I thought if I played along, if I got something on Mulder, or even on you, maybe I'd have some more leverage." He started walking towards the warehouse's main entry, then clearly made a decision to speak, stopping in his tracks. He spoke to Skinner without turning around. "I spent a lot of hours on them. I know what the X-Files division has been doing since Scully came back from Pennsylvania, and I can tell you that they haven't even got a goddamn file with my mother's real name on it. She's still Patient fucking X."

"Look, Jeff, that's not entirely their fault... I haven't given them a lot of room to work lately."

"I don't care whose fault it is. It doesn't matter. You give Mulder a choice between Dana Scully or his sister, or my mother, and we know what he's going to choose. I don't blame him. We all have to do our own crusades. I'm just going to have to do mine."

* * *

They're sitting quietly when they're found, staring out the windshield of their little white car, its engine stilled. The road is barely more than a single lane, hacked out of and surrounded by dank, closely packed forest. On one side the brush conceals a significant drop, careening down over an steep and uneven slope. The car's long doors open simultaneously and they step out. The woman slings a small backpack over one shoulder. She is small, verging on tiny, and wears cutoff jeans and a man's sweatshirt far too large for her. He is tall and lean in a plain gray t-shirt, equally plain blue jeans. They seem unaware of each other at first.

They meet side by side in front of the car, slowing slightly. Joining hands, they walk in a shuffling, stiff fashion, like children acting out a second-grade marriage. Her eyes are raised, his downcast. Both seem vacant, preoccupied. The three men who find them are unaccustomed to the place, dark-skinned, used to close-packed humanity and warmer climes. One of the men steps forward, looking around nervously, and gently guides the pair towards the waiting van with his hand on the

tall man's shoulder. The other two men jog to the small car and crouch behind the open doors, straining to push it off to the side. One of them notes the smell in the cab, the scent of contained bodies. He's a sensitive man, imagines that he would have known from the odor that it had been a man and woman inside the vehicle even if he hadn't seen them. The two lean in behind the car's tail for a final push, shoving it down the incline to tear haphazardly through the brush and crunch to a halt twenty yards below.

* * *

It had been a few years, the smoker thought, since he was conscious of the presence of someone who wanted to kill him. Not an assassin, someone who would, but a real killer, someone who wanted to. He knew Alex was out there, within five hundred yards, waiting until the rules changed and he could take his shot.

Pandhu closed his cell phone and gave it back to his aide. He nodded to the young man and said a few quiet words. Pandhu approached the smoker as his aide stayed a respectful few yards away.

"I've heard from my people," Pandhu said. "They have secured Mulder and Scully. I'll have them brought out here, of course."

"That's good news," the smoker replied. "Does Mulder have the information you require?"

"It seems that he does, yes."

The smoker's driver also moved to a distance. He didn't affect an SUV for himself like the others. He and Pandhu leaned against the large sedan. Something about the outdoors created a certain informality.

"Why was it necessary for them to... act as intermediaries?" the smoker asked. Pandhu removed his glasses, studying them idly.

"I don't know why the Gatekeepers act as they do. In some calculation of their, Mulder is in the right place at the right time. To the extent I presume to understand their motivations, they are strongly driven by a belief that key events are determined by fate rather than action."

The smoker puffed silently. Pandhu continued.

"They take this interest in our world, in our existence... simply because they see certain outcomes as part of a course of events that must unfold, beyond considerations of good or ill. The entities exist outside this course of events."

The smoker had resigned himself to the fact that mistakes had been made-- things they should have realized long ago. The seeming contradictions in what they believed were the Colonists' actions. All along the Colonists had been fighting a war in the background.

"If the plan goes Keith's way," he asked. "If they hold the... woman, the cosmonaut. What happens then?"

"It's happening already," Pandhu began quietly, his voice unusually introspective. "It will begin with those who are sensitive, and unaware. Those who have had contact with alien consciousness; the Colonists' experiments, or yours. Violence, hatred. I believe some are already feeling it, acting on it. Young Mr. Krycek seems a little unstable, doesn't he. The woman, Scully, she was taken in one of your experiments as well, was she not? Perhaps her as well."

The smoker nodded, more as an indication to continue than an acknowledgment.

"The entities will take them first, probably within days. They will be the harbingers, murderous and maddened prophets animated by terrible energies. Keith's methods are right, even if his goal is wrong. The majority of the subjects on your extermination lists, your Protocol Seven, will be the second generation as the woman is the first. Your work, yours and the Colonists, have provided them with a ready beachhead."

It was a classic analytical error, the smoker thought, to idealize our opponent-- to ascribe to them infallibility, unity of purpose, rational and unconflicting motivations.

"In time the entities will decode the secrets of matter in this universe outside of the tiny orbital laboratory they have been working in. It may be centuries. It may be hours. They will emerge from air, water, earth, forms limited only by their own considerable imagination. It is a science, of a sort, beyond our comprehension."

The Colonists had attempted the forcible colonization of an alien world, through a bizarre and elaborate scheme of biological infiltration. Of course. An act not of conquest, but of desperate survival, faced with defeat on another front of which we were unaware.

"Your Gatekeepers, they do not have the power to prevent this?"

"As you said yourself, power is not inherent, but in the exercise of will. Again, their motivations are unclear."

"As are yours."

"The information which the Gatekeepers have imparted to Mulder will empower me to prevent the entities' transfer to our world via the woman."

"And what besides?"

"Still you accuse me of seeking power," Pandhu chuckled. "You cannot conceive of anything else. Perhaps I seek knowledge?"

"Need I remind you of the relationship between the two?"

Pandhu only smiled in response. The smoker looked out across the large clearing. The Consortium site flattened about two hundred yards of underbrush each way. It amazed him how Western civilization would bring the same things everywhere. Wheels. Guns. Uniforms. Parking lots. Our little spidery flying machines. Our invisible structures by which we impose order upon ourselves and our relations.

"Most of the personnel at the landing site will follow my orders," he said. "I frequently work within the military structures." He didn't meet Pandhu's eyes. "If we act decisively at the right moment we should be able to present the others with a fait accompli."

"How do you wish to deal with them?" Pandhu asked nonchalantly. The smoker considered as he opened a matchbook. Pandhu found it almost impossible to track the transitions from one cigarette to another.

s o k o l

"As they tried, and failed, to deal with me," he responded after a pause that he seemed to find satisfying.

"How do you wish to deal with Mulder once I've recovered the information I require?"

"Ensure that he and Scully are kept safe until we take control of the situation."

"We have an agreement, then."

"We have a shared purpose, Doctor Pandhu."

* * *

The young men, duskily foreign and soft-spoken, were polite about the restraints and even said something about 'under the circumstances'. Their captive didn't struggle. The chair was probably distantly related somehow to dentistry. The restraints on his wrists and ankles were solid circlets of steel a half inch thick and two inches wide, presumably with the intention of keeping him in place even if his skeleton turned traitor and decided to try to go it alone.

Once he was suitably restrained, they stepped back towards the door off to his right. The room was longer than it was wide, bare except for the restraining chair and a small folding table. They waited in silence for a few minutes, not speaking among themselves, until a slight, neat figure of an older man appeared and quietly dismissed them.

"Hello, Mr. Mulder."

His greeting wasn't returned. Pandhu stepped closer to Mulder's chair, his manner familiar.

"I remember you, you know. You asked incisive questions. You wanted to know more. So many people just wish to reinforce their existing biases."

"Can we get this over with?" Mulder rattled the cuffs on his wrists by way of explanation for his impatience.

s o k o l

"I apologize for the restraints. It's just a matter of the circumstances we're operating under. But we have a little time, Mr. Mulder. I'd like to know what you're feeling. This is a rare opportunity."

"You'll know soon enough, won't you?"

"But that will be different. Come on, Mr. Mulder. You've received quite an education. What does it mean?"

"It's not meant for our minds. I can feel the trails of vibration that connect all lives on this planet, past, present and future, but it's not giving me much on whether the Braves are gonna have any depth in the bullpen this year."

"It's a matter of perspective, I suppose."

"If I want to, I can hear any mind I can imagine, right now. I just can't understand any of them. It's pointless. That's, it's hilarious actually. All these minds, all these souls connected, and we're all alone."

"Any of them?"

"One."

"That must be reassuring. The space between one and infinity is, itself, infinitely smaller than that between zero and one. Can you sense her now?"

"I can sense that you'd better hurry up and get this done or she's likely to show up and kick your ass. That's generally how it works with us."

"They don't understand lives, Mr. Mulder, how glorious and brilliant these transitory things of ours are. To be one of them is to be a page in a vast encyclopedia."

"Like you."

"Whatever do you mean, Mr. Mulder?"

"Aren't you beyond human? Isn't that what you think?"

"Oh, but I am human, Mr. Mulder. A thousand times over. A thousand lives past."

"Now you want the future," Mulder said softly.

"Can you see the future that clearly?"

"There's no point. It ends how it ends." Mulder felt as if he was sharing his conversational duties with a co-writer, another Mulder who apparently knew things he didn't.

"Then if there is only one outcome, knowledge of the outcome grants... infallibility, does it not?" There was an eagerness in Pandhu's tone.

Mulder felt himself smile in response, saying nothing.

"Perhaps you just lack perspective, Mr. Mulder. It's time to take what I need. I've enjoyed this conversation."

Mulder was aware of a bright, soundless flash. He wasn't sure whether it had taken place outside of him, or in. He blinked his eyes to clear them, spots wheeling frantically. Pandhu was gone... no... as Mulder's vision cleared he saw the man lying against the wall at his feet, moving slowly.

Pandhu coughed, rolling over onto his knees and rising slowly, wiping blood from under his nose. He studied it on his fingertips, rubbing them together.

"You knew."

"Apparently you didn't."

Pandhu nodded, as if impressed.

"I merely misunderstood the nature of this. In the past, such burdens tend to be carried by one great soul, not two damaged ones." Pandhu swayed on his feet, his voice strengthening. His arms lifted out slightly to the sides. His fingers moved slowly in some unconsciously intricate pattern, blood staining his left hand. He regarded Mulder intently. "You have the key, but she is the code. No matter. It's

what you have that I'm really interested in. You think you can keep it from me? That I can't just take this from you? That I can't take your place?"

"You can't. It's not for you." It's me and it's Scully, he thought. We're going to do this one thing. Just this one.

"Only you are worthy, then? No one else can be trusted with the secrets of the future?"

"You don't understand. There's not much future to know. Me and Scully... everyone else around us is gone. They're all gone. Almost everyone's gone."

"Nonsense, Mr. Mulder." Pandhu straightened his jacket, tugging at the lower hem and approaching Mulder again. "There are more people in the world than there have ever been. Where have they come from? Who are these souls?"

"They're like you... finished... just going on, spinning out the rest of the cycle. You think you're some kind of demigod. You just remember what came before, your pasts." Mulder laughed quietly. "You've just got a bad case of *deja vu*."

"It comes with certain benefits. I've been a king, Mr. Mulder, and a slave of one." Pandhu's face came in close to him, the angle strange. "Died of starvation, of childbirth." Strange to impossible. Pandhu's smile was gentle, almost teasing. His chest hovered about six inches above Mulder's. Mulder glanced down, saw that Pandhu's feet were no longer on the floor. "There are things in human experience that you could only dream of."

Pandhu closed his eyes. His body stretched out parallel to the floor, floating in space with his face, blood-streaked upper lip, eight inches from Mulder's. Mulder's ears began to ring, a babbling murmur of voices crowding each other out.

"Don't do this," Mulder shouted. "You'll just be vulnerable to them. They'll destroy you before you can destroy her." Pandhu didn't respond at first, not even registering the volume. Seconds passed as the ringing in Mulder's skull became a roar. He felt his awareness withdraw, leaving his limbs, centering in the base of his skull and his spine. Mulder could almost feel dark-skinned fingers, more than ten, multitudes, reaching through his skull and rummaging. The light in the room seemed to dim, sucked into the space Pandhu occupied.

Mulder's vision tunneled and blacked out.

"You're telling me the truth," Pandhu said. Silence. Pandhu stood beside Mulder's chair again.

"It had to be this way." Mulder's throat was dry, his voice shaky. Or it should have been, he thought, hearing his own words as if spoken in his voice by another tongue. "You brought us here, played the part you had to. There's only one way it can all end and you can't avoid it. It doesn't matter what we try to do."

"Indeed. It's time for us to go our separate ways, Mr. Mulder." Pandhu gave him an odd hybrid of a nod and a shallow bow, placing his hand over his heart, and turned to leave.

"Hey!" Mulder rattled the restraints on his wrists. "Fuck... wait... damn it."

"Don't worry." Pandhu turned halfway around, his hand unconsciously leaving a smear of blood on the door frame. "I'm sending someone for you."

* * *

The Indian men she assumed were Pandhu's had separated them as they reached what she supposed was the next landing site; taking her out and driving away with Mulder. He'd nodded at her, reassuringly. She tried to memorize the layout as they walked; five large prefab trailer-type buildings in a row, of which she was in the farthest left as they approached, unsure of the cardinal directions in the dark. A sixth, differently constructed trailer was slightly separate; she guessed from the SUVs parked outside it that it was some kind of command point. She saw uniforms, uncertain in the distance what service, and unmarked black fatigues-- dozens of men at least.

The double-wide trailer was divided into cells with a narrow hallway down the center. Her cell was about seven feet by five, with a shelf she could sit or lie on built into the long side. The barred door appeared to be cardlocked. Everything was plastic or aluminum, even the bars--built light, she guessed, so the whole unit could be carried by helicopter. If she had a crowbar, and was a hundred pounds heavier, she would bet even money on being able to break out. She'd tried a dozen kicks,

lying on her back and lashing out with both legs-- rewarded each time with a promising shudder, but no apparent cumulative effect. Her feet hurt, and she'd gotten up from the floor shaking with tension, surprised at her own desperate violence. There was a strange, crawling, familiar feeling of familiarity here-- of worse to come.

There was a bottle of water that she didn't trust. She could feel the surrounding forest's humidity, cool and damp, even though she couldn't see it, she felt as though it slightly quenched her thirst. She could hear the dull growl of diesel generators and probably two helicopters. No voices; she appeared to be the only occupant of the entire trailer.

She heard footsteps, the floor panels in the hallway sounding slightly loose. Then something even her deadened sense of smell recognized.

"I specifically requested a no-smoking room."

"You're starting to sound like Fox," he replied. "I suppose that's to be expected. I hear you've become quite the killer, too."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm rescuing you."

"In exchange for what?"

"A moment of your time, Agent Scully. I need to appeal to that... rational mind."

"I refuse to play your games."

She disappointed herself by starting slightly when he stepped close to the bars with a quickness that seemed unnatural.

"You don't have a choice," he hissed, stabbing his cigarette at her. He stepped back slightly and spoke in his usual tone. "You've never had a choice. Duane Barry didn't give you a choice. Your cancer didn't give you a choice. Your daughter, Emily. You think that was coincidence, that was fate, God's will?"

She looked around the tiny cell: no apparent conveniences, seeming too flimsy to really hold a person... a human... for very long. Oh, Lord, she'd been here before. These aren't cells, these are cages, cages for test subjects...

"We own you, Dana Katherine Scully. We own you down to the last strand of your DNA. When Fox saves you from these perils, it's because you're still useful to me, and I choose to reward his diligence. In fact, that you and Fox ever met was my doing."

"Go to hell." Her teeth clenched together as she said it.

"I can't protect you and Fox anymore, you know."

"Is that what you think? That you've been protecting us?"

"If you had any idea. You're still alive, Dana."

"Stick with Agent Scully." If I had that crowbar, she thought, knew you were coming, I would have bent the bar, broken it loose at the top, left it in place and waited for you and burst out, swinging the crowbar with both hands, smashing your fucking skull, you fall backwards first, catching yourself on the opposite bars, there's a defense wound where I break your radius and ulna on the second stroke and then your skull on the third, crushed between the bars behind you and my weapon in front. I just keep going and going until you're fucking pulp and I smash the pointed end into your chest, straight down like you're a vampire, your blood spattering up on my face.

"But I feel we've been through so much together. It's almost as though we're family."

"Fuck you," she whispered, her voice rasping harshly. The little smile he had developed disappeared.

"You and Fox no longer serve a purpose, Agent Scully, at least, not in a way that will make you inviolate, allow you or others to bargain for your lives as you have before." He studied his cigarette for a moment, then leaned in again. "Do you remember this place, one like it?" He gestured into her cell, down the narrow hallway. "We can bring you back."

He looked as if he had completed an unpleasant duty, and continued.

"Something's going to happen. If I succeed, I won't tolerate further interference from you. If I fail, you'll be killed the second you're found. I suggest you try to prepare for both possibilities. There's a footlocker in the hallway. All your things will be there. Go out this door, turn right, out the door at the end. There's no sentry there. Agent Mulder will be in the second trailer to your left. There will probably be a sentry between the first and second trailers. If you make it that far, go up along the fire road to the west until you reach the crest, then go a mile north along the ridgeline until you reach another road. You'll be met there."

"Met by who?"

He flipped the keycard through the bars.

"Your remaining friends. You should probably hurry."

* * *

She made herself as small as she could, crouching in the shadows under the nose of the first trailer. The footlocker had held a neatly packed backpack, all their documents and tightly rolled wads of cash. She found that the smoker, or someone, had screwed a silencer onto her weapon, mismatched powdercoated black against the silver.

She would hazard a guess that it was three or four in the morning. The area was lit with blindingly bright lamps on tall poles at opposite ends of the complex, throwing harsh sprays of white light and leaving dark streaks of sharp-edged shadow.

No time. She had no time. She could see the man's back and legs, standing between the trailer barely twenty feet to her left. If he turned around he'd see her, a flash of pale legs in the shadow-- she was still wearing her shorts. If she managed to scoot across to the shadow of the second trailer, across seven feet of crushed turf and mud, what then? What shape was Mulder in? Would she have to drag him?

She moved quickly, coming up four feet behind the man, just out of arm's reach if he turned around. He looked impossibly huge, as though his Kevlar-suited back were ten feet across and three floors above her.

"There's a gun pointed at your head," she commanded. "Don't make a sound or I will kill you. Get down on your knees." She heard the man's sudden, sharp intake of breath, saw him stand in momentary confusion. "On your knees!" He complied, slowly, still facing away from her. "Slowly, unsling your rifle. Throw it under the trailer to your right. Now put your hands on your head." Scully moved to the right, pressing herself against the trailer, until she stood at ninety degrees to the sentry. He had a pale, hard face, partially in clear-cut shadow. He glanced over at her. "Eyes forward! Turn to the left and face that trailer."

Jesus, Scully thought. I haven't got handcuffs. He might, but I can't search him, he could take me in a second. She looked frantically down the narrow lane between the two trailers. Maybe she could get him in one of the cells, get into Mulder's trailer before... no, he'd just...

This time there was no moment of inevitability, no time to think. Her gun coughed twice as the man spun in a crouch, launching himself forward. She was already moving by the time he stopped, lying face-down, his hands clawing in the mud.

* * *

"Hi, Mulder."

"Hi, asshole."

Pandhu had been gone less than five minutes, Mulder thought. If this was his idea of sending the cavalry...

"I heard you'd be here." Alex stood beside the chair with his head cocked, studying Mulder. "You look tired."

"You look crazy." Mulder said this with a faint tone of surprise. It was true. Alex's face was a study in gleeful intensity, like Jerry Lee about to let rip on a flaming piano.

"You're mistaken, Mulder. This isn't the crazy face." Alex circled Mulder's chair, grabbing the headrest to give it a good shake. "This is the I-don't-give-a-fuck face. The crazy face comes later."

Krycek straddled the foot of the chair. Mulder had already tried his best to break the restraints before, and was sure that even the idea of driving a hiking boot into Krycek's nuts wouldn't help.

"Well, if you let me up, I'm happy to get crazy." Mulder gave a thumbs-up from one restrained hand. "Ghandi send you in here? That's a great way to thank me for keeping his head from exploding."

Krycek rubbed his right hand as the brief flare of lights dimmed and Mulder felt a warm pain beginning to seep through his jaw. Still leading with the right, Mulder thought, shaking his head to clear it. That plastic left is going to hurt when he gets around to it, though.

"Know what your problem is, Mulder? Besides ingratitude, I mean."

Keep him busy. Keep him talking. She's coming.

"Closet fags with crushes on me keep handcuffing me, telling me meaningless bullshit, and then going all S and M?"

"Actually, it's not your problem. You are the problem. Everything's just gotta stop for you. Way I understand it, that goes back, boy, a long way. That was supposed to be you, not your sister. But Fox was a special boy."

"If I kiss you back, will you shut the fuck up and leave me alone?"

"How about sweet, sweet Scully? She shouldn't have had to go through that, but no, luck of the draw, of all the offices a dame coulda walked into, she had to walk into yours."

Krycek leaned in, grinning.

"I knew, Mulder. Not what they were doing to her specifically. But I knew what they did to them, how they come out after, what they leave behind. I felt bad at the time, watching you, but it was hard to follow. Sometimes you'd just sit there and stare at that little cross. Other times it was like you'd forgotten about her completely."

"Look, just fuck you, okay? Has this monologue got a point, or can we just skip to the hitting?"

Now would be a good time, Scully, he thought.

"And, of course, that's where my story begins. The wonderful memories I owe to you, Mulder. Head full of black oil. Do you know what the oil does to keep you alive, Mulder? You know you can't starve to death, die of thirst? Doesn't mean you don't feel it. It just won't kill you."

Mulder pursed his lips at him, an imitation of a kiss. Krycek led with the right again, harder this time. Mulder blinked hard. He could feel his lip swell, feel air cooling the new blood on his cheek. He smiled at Krycek, jerked his head towards Krycek's gloved left hand.

"So when you use the other one, does it really feel like someone else?"

"You tell me."

Mulder's head swam in the aftermath of the blow. How the hell could someone Krycek's size hit so fucking hard? Krycek had landed a straight jab on his left temple, just above the eye. He was vaguely aware of Krycek rubbing at his left arm, as if striking Mulder had hurt the stump. The younger man's eyes lit with violence.

I know Scully is coming. She has to come. I know how this ends, Mulder thought. We're getting out of this. They said we're getting out of this.

Right Mulder, a Krycek-shaped voice in his head said. Who told you that? Santa Claus? Rudolf? Marvin the Martian? Which one was it this time?

Krycek flexed the fingers of his right hand, his left hanging limp by his side. Mulder could see him looking for a shot, trying to decide whether to start breaking bones. The younger man sighed, contemplated his work for a moment. He shook his head in mock frustration.

"You know, Mulder, I'm just not feeling this. I think I'm gonna go have a little chat with Scully, okay?" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, started to turn away from Mulder's chair.

"Stay here, you sonofabitch," Mulder almost yelled. Krycek turned back and put on a pained expression.

"Don't worry about that. She's not my type." He stepped in close, leaning into Mulder's ear. "Besides, I hate it when they freeze up on me. Ruins the mood, how does she put it, when her body remembers. Right, that's it. My body remembers. Which makes me wonder." Krycek stood up straight, looking off into an imagined distance, pretending to ponder. "Think she's totally honest with you, every time it's happened? Never taken one for the team, lay back and thought of the X-Files?"

Mulder hissed something between his teeth that Krycek didn't quite catch, but which nonetheless gave him immense pleasure.

"So don't worry, St. Scully's virtue will be intact. Can't promise anything else, though. Want me to bring you back a holy relic? Some of that hair?"

Mulder smiled, wide, gleaming, predatory.

"I'm gonna kill you this time, Krycek."

"Are you?"

"Oh, yeah."

I should have closed the door, Krycek thought as he turned around, feeling air move, feeling that slowing of time as adrenaline frantically tried to surge far enough to make muscle memory and reflex take over. He expected to smell smoke, was surprised at the flash of red hair, the barrel of the gun pointing up at him rather than across.

"No," she said, "I am."

* * *

"Holy shit." Mulder gasped. Scully shoved her weapon into the back of her belt, briefly fumbling with the added length of the silencer. She'd stepped over Krycek's body, not looking down, carefully arranging herself so as not to step in the rapidly

spreading evidence of her kill.

"Are you... Mulder, you're hurt." She laid the back of her hand on his cheek briefly. Mulder smelled burnt gunpowder. Scully twitched as if remembering something and began working the restraints on his wrists.

"Fucker has, had problems expressing his feelings." Mulder rubbed his jaw and sat up slowly. "Woozy. Not from this, from before." He reached down to free his ankles as Scully mumbled a brief apology for not having noticed. "Scully, where are we, anyway?" He looked around.

"You don't remember."

"No... oh... Tennessee. We were on our way south. You told me a really embarrassing Phil Collins story, then... aw, shit..." He rubbed his face with both hands, then exhaled slowly. "I'm missing a lot more than nine minutes, aren't I?"

"You're not alone, Mulder. I think it's been three days."

"We were gone for three days?"

"No, I remember being brought here. I'm sure we're in Washington, the ground's wet and there's pine trees everywhere. I think we came most of the way ourselves, the same way I... took Cassandra to Ruskin Dam. Some of it will come back to you, I'm starting to remember pieces."

"Where were you?" He slid off the seat, reached out to take Scully's hand.

"Locked up two trailers over."

"How'd you get out?"

"Cancerman. The cancerman helped me escape."

"This is sounding like the weirdest three days I've forgotten since my second year at college." Mulder looked at Krycek's body and carefully leaned down. Krycek's gun was in a shoulder holster, easily accessible under his outstretched arm. Mulder took it, checked the clip. He avoided looking at the face ruined by Scully's bullet.

"Next time, let me. If it gets out that my girlfriend killed Alex Krycek for me I'm gonna look like a real pussy." The joke fell more than flat, slipping and falling grossly in the spill of blood. Scully's hand withdrew, her arms folding under her breasts as she looked blankly at her handiwork.

"I think he was going to hurt you, Scully. The things he said..."

She exhaled heavily and placed one hand awkwardly on his shoulder, still looking down.

"Not now, Mulder. Let's get out of here."

He led, walking carefully to the open door of the room and peering quickly each way down the narrow corridor.

"Scully?"

"Yeah." She'd positioned herself behind him. Her gun was out again. He pulled back into the room, gestured sheepishly for her to go first.

"I got no idea where I am, where we are, or where we're going, and I think you're ahead on that score right now. Maybe you should lead."

She smiled briefly before stepping into the corridor.

"Now. Now you say that."

* * *

Outside the command trailer, one man moved close to another. Both wore uniforms and answered to complex chains of allegiance that the uniforms did not completely describe.

"Mike, how many of your guys are in there?"

"Just Davis. There's one of the Brits, Gillis or something, and one of the New York guys."

Two SUVs trundled up, disgorging a double handful of simpler, black uniforms. Weapons clacked and protruded, legs and mandibles of a disjointed black insect.

"Think you can get Davis to come out?"

"Aw, shit, Ron, what the fuck...?"

Finally, another man left the passenger seat of one of the trucks. His overcoat hung still in the pre-morning calm. He stubbed out one cigarette, spoke quiet words to a black uniform while he prepared another. The soldiers both noticed him, felt the world realign.

"It's Smokey, Mike. He's got the place sewn up."

"What is this, some kind of coup or something...?"

One soldier laid a hand on the other's shoulder, his voice quietly pleading.

"It's a suit thing, Mike. They're gonna do it whether we play along or not. Look, brother, there's gonna be bodies here in a couple of minutes and it doesn't have to be any of us. Just get Davis to come out here."

* * *

The Englishman remembered the first time he'd heard a gun go off in an enclosed space, how his ears rang. It had been in Hong Kong. He spun around to watch Angelo's man stumble back against one of the chairs, his dead tumble to the floor preceded by his gun. The fat man started to rise, wasn't allowed to finish as one of the black-clad soldiers raised a rifle, freezing him in place. The smoker brushed past the two soldiers in the lead-- avoiding Angelo's eyes, Keith noticed.

"What is the meaning of this?" Keith demanded, steeling his voice.

"What did you expect?" The smoker looked around the small command post, finally returning his gentle gaze to the Englishman. "That I would return penitent, like a kicked dog?"

"Is this about revenge, Charles? Petty revenge?"

The smoker smiled briefly at the near-forgotten sound of his own name. He wondered if Keith would be the last ever to use it.

"Don't be silly. It's about power."

* * *

Mulder reflexively ducked when he heard the pop of gunfire, then realized it was far behind them, only the higher frequencies rising up over the low roar of the base's generators. Four, five shots, then nothing more as he looked up the hill to where Scully was leading.

She'd steered them off the road, where they dragged themselves up through the heavy brush about fifteen yards off to one side.

Scully turned, and dawn suddenly broke over the ridgeline they were climbing, spilling sunlight into the bowl below. Her mouth dropped open, and her eyes widened.

"Mulder, look."

He turned around, squinting west. High above, in the early morning clear, he saw a small crescent of white and a glimmer of metal. He scrambled up to Scully and crouched beside her as the tiny shape resolved in the distance. The parachute was white, unreadable red markings on it, a tiny sphere hanging below.

"What's that?" Another white crescent, smaller, higher, falling more slowly.

"Second parachute," he said. "That's what's supposed to happen. That's her." He rose, tugging at her arm. "Scully, come here. I know what we have to do."

* * *

A mother should be proud of ambitious children.

The viewport of the capsule was charred and blackened by re-entry, but I could still

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see glorious dawn break over the mountains at thirty thousand meters. They loved the mountains, loved anything with texture, shape, form, because it can be destroyed, crushed, used to crush. A choking, sulphurous smell clung to us after the ejection seat fired and hurtled us into the sky. They used my senses, tasted the volatile chemicals, and excitedly sang to each other of a moon composed of nothing but volcanoes, shredded by its wrenching tides and leaking its molten entrails into space. Just before the parachute snapped me upright I could turn my head inside the restrictive helmet to see a dark expanse of sea far to the west. They noted it, imagining boiling, vaporization, and the pressure of depth.

I was incidental to them at this point, allowed control only of the basic physical functions necessary to bring us to the green, green, beautifully flammable space below.

"Galina."

* * *

I hear Mulder's voice in my ear, in his chest against my back, and I don't recognize what he says at first, but then I do and the ground drops away from me.

* * *

I can feel the catch of fear in her chest, feel her stiffen. It's like everyone's first jump. I whisper to her, to this earthbound sister of mine, in a voice that my children will not hear. I want her to relax, know the joy of flight and the freedom of sky.

* * *

"Oh, Mulder, I can hear her, she's here..." Scully's head leans back against his shoulders as she opens herself. Small strong arms stretch outwards pulling his, fingers entwined.

* * *

I can't. It's a momentary inconvenience to them, in their consuming love for me, for my children to prevent me from motion, prevent me from interfering with our descent.

* * *

His fingers tighten around hers, his jaw tightens. He is conscious of something, this beautiful feeling he realizes he's known before. It's her, it's all of them, it's the Scully-chord vibrating through his bones. The power of it echoes back through the moments and decades before, like a string forever tuned with his. He sees blue eyes, brown eyes, green, lit with the same pale light. He pulls her in to him, wrapping their arms around her body.

It's her. He can tell it's her, even in this echo of a past symphony. He'd know her anywhere. It's not all here, there isn't enough left of the stage to support the entire weight of the Scully orchestra. But there's still the bass swell of bravery, a tympanic rumble of action, and a sweet alto of careful wonder.

He can hear Galina's voice as well, or maybe it's Scully's voice, or she and Scully have worked out some sort of temporary arrangement. It's practical; they'd do that.

"Mulder, you have to help us. We can't..."

He realizes he can. It's simple in execution, in what it means to her and all of them, impossibly complex in another way that single souls don't need to understand to let it happen. He feels himself smiling gently because it's so Scully, which she was.

"It's all right. You were there. You did it." The body in his arms is familiar, yet not, the way he knows his voice must be to her.

"You did everything you could. It's all right to let go."

He shows her how it works, how things have to end and start over and why, as his own understanding of it slips away.

* * *

I am so glad to have known this, even if it is just a sudden harmony at the end of this strange and terrible coda to my life. I know where I belong. I can feel my little sister's arms surround me, and our lover's besides. And mine are free. My movements and my destiny are all mine.

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I hear a voice-- perhaps it is hers, mine, his, perhaps Maria Fedorovna with her three Fascist kills and her big machinist's hands at the controls of the Ilyushin biplane.

"Let's go, little falcon. Let's fly home."

This first. I reach up, smacking the release knob for my helmet visor, then wrenching at the large buckles on either side of my neck. I push up, my helmet rattling away from me and falling.

The harness buckles are designed to release easily if one knows the trick. The strap between my legs goes last, so I pitch forward, accelerating rapidly towards the dawn. This is how I love freefall in any case, diving like a dart, the thrill of velocity. My children are shouting, maddened, but I am pleased to share this with them. The wind tears at my face and I spread my arms. I am in the sky.

Ya lastochka, ya tchaika, ya sokol.

* * *

Mulder's breath burned in his throat. He still felt woozy, exhausted, sucked-out. Scully had more energy, and his longer legs barely made up the difference. He stumbled through the brush, tripping himself. Scully was lower, nimbler. He could hear her breathing, loud and sharp and regular, as though she were on a treadmill. There was no trail, just a thinning of vegetation from the pressure of wind and rain. They ran just below the ridgeline, a fugitive's path.

"There," she gasped, stopping and bending over at the waist. The line of the hill broke suddenly forty yards ahead into a man-made angle, the curve of a road visible. She was conscious of Mulder running up behind her. Her head itched, her hair unkempt and tangled with humidity and sweat. She counted back; it had probably been four days since she'd bathed.

The recollection hit her ferociously, desperately coupling with Mulder against the wall of a tiny room, her hand fiercely gripping a coat hook for support. What day had that been? She straightened up, meeting Mulder's eyes. He was actually grinning at her.

"What?" she asked.

She knew 'what,' wasn't so sure about 'how'.

When their feet met the gravel of the fire road, their bodies turned different directions at first. Realizing, they turned back towards each other, almost bumping, before picking a direction and setting off at a tired jog.

"He said friends?"

"Yeah," she panted.

"We have friends?"

* * *

"Agent Scully! Mulder!" The sedan crawled round a curve thirty yards behind them as she spun, seeing an arm waving out the window. It accelerated towards them, then came to a gravel-crunching stop. The driver's door opened, then the passenger's.

"Sir? What are you doing here? Agent Spender?"

"Long story," Spender broke in. Mulder looked almost irritated. "Looks like we have an unlikely mutual friend."

"Cancerman?" Scully asked.

"Cancerman." Skinner sighed, looking up and down the road. No one else was visible, though he could imagine a dozen snipers in the heavy brush and trees to either side. "We're getting you out of here."

Mulder noticed the older man's attention to their surroundings.

"I don't think we were followed. I heard gunshots back there. I have a feeling that for once we weren't the most interesting thing going on."

"You both okay?" Spender asked, drumming his fingers urgently on the roof of the

car.

"Yeah, fine," Scully said. "Let's go."

The tires quieted as they left rough gravel for smooth concrete. They started passing buildings, businesses, people starting their days. Most moved like them, east towards Seattle. They were in the back seat of the rental car. Mulder flipped idly at the ashtray and did most of the talking, short acknowledgments to Skinner's statements and questions. Scully leaned her head against the window, her expression unreadable as words bounced around-- cigarette, murder, self-defense, warrants, NSA, arrest, yes, no, I don't know.

"You're sure Krycek's dead?"

"I can tell you the last thing that went through his mind was about nine millimeters across," Mulder responded. Skinner grunted, nodding.

I'm five-three in heels. I weigh one hundred ten pounds. Damn it, what am I supposed to do. It's okay, Mom, nothing will happen and if it does that's why I carry a gun.

Skinner looked in the rearview, trying to give Mulder some kind of masculine acknowledgment, some kind of soldier-gesture. Mulder shook his head slowly.

"No... it was Scully," he said quietly. She straightened up, arranging herself in the seat and glancing at Mulder. Their hands crept together, hers on top of his on the backseat line children would fight over.

"Sir, we have a favor to ask you," Mulder began. "Probably the last one for a while."

"Mulder, we can offer you all the protection the FBI can give." Skinner glanced over his shoulder as he spoke. "We can take care of this. There's a bunch of agendas in play here, lots of horses to trade. But I don't think your taking up the X-Files again, or even working in the field again, is going to be an option for a while. I don't know if that makes any difference..."

Their fingers twined slightly tighter.

"I appreciate that, sir, but... we're gonna do this ourselves for a while."

"Agent Scully?" Skinner asked.

"Sir, if it's possible..." When she spoke, Skinner recognized the voice as the one he'd known. Clear, slightly husky, not expressionless but giving away little. It was a beautiful voice. He was going to miss it. "I'd like you to contact my mother. Tell her that I'm all right, and that I'll be in touch with her when I can."

"I'll do that."

* * *

9:48 PM
Sunday

Cedar Coast Motel
Port Orford, Oregon

"This okay?"

The flimsy door of the shower clicked shut as his arms slipped around her, one hand briefly stroking her wet hair before settling on her naked hip.

"Yeah, yeah, it's good," she replied. Soap and shampoo had been abandoned a few minutes before in favor of just standing under the warm water.

"Just wanted to be close to you." She smiled at the quiet endearment.

"Thank you."

Outside the motel unit sat a small, beat-up Japanese truck that had, until recently, sat outside a service station displaying a "For Sale" sign. It was less comfortable than the bus they'd been on overnight, but it so far seemed capable of going wherever it was pointed.

"Mmmm. I'm so tired."

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The round table in the room beyond held sunflower seeds, a local-brand granola bar (half-eaten), water, diet sodas, ammunition. Looks like a party, he'd said.

"Rough week," he whispered, swaying gently with her under the spray. Their clothes were puddled around the motel room, awaiting as-yet-unspoken plans to see if anything in the laundry room three units down worked.

"Oh, yeah," she said quietly.

She pressed backwards, arranging herself against him. Her heel to his instep, her calf against his, her rear pressed against his thighs, soft bulge of his sex against her lower back, the hair on his chest just above her shoulder blades, leaning her head back until she nestled in below his chin.

"Mulder... you said things you probably don't remember."

"Probably."

"Do you want to know what they were?"

"I don't know... do I?"

"You said you knew your sister was dead."

He was silent and probably expressionless though she could not see his face without twisting herself around. She could feel his resignation nonetheless.

"They... from what you said, it was their experiments," she continued.

"I know." His voice vibrating through her back. Their bodies had sealed together under the water. Rivulets ran around them but not between. "I don't want revenge. I know it happened that way because it had to. I wish she hadn't had so much pain. I wish that she hadn't been so afraid for so long."

He pulled his head back, and she felt their bodies parting slightly. Mulder nuzzled the wet hair at her neck aside with his lips and nose.

"Same way I know that your chip's gone, that you don't need it anymore. I wish you

hadn't gone through that, but in the end..." He kissed her there where it had been, and then stood up straight, gathering her in again. "I'm still not sure about the tattoo, though," he laughed softly. "I guess they didn't get it."

"Probably some metallic element in the pigment, Mulder."

"Did you just speculate about the mechanics of alien technology, Dr. Scully?"

"You just speculated about their aesthetic sensibilities." She didn't know how to say it, didn't know how to ask. "Mulder..." She took one large hand in hers, pulled it down to where it spread water-slicked over her lower belly.

"I don't know, or I don't remember."

"Oh, boy," she whispered, feeling a reflexive sob at the end of the word and a hitch in his chest too. This was it, she thought, this should be crying time, but she was just too exhausted. There wasn't enough water in the well. "Are we doing the right thing?"

"Define right."

She felt something she remembered, a luminous burst, a tiny perfect star of her very own. Unquenchable light, weak and distant but she could turn herself towards it, swooping and accelerating, cold dark matter boiling off in a trail of brightness behind them. Comet thoughts, and the smile to herself was tiny but very real. He wouldn't think to believe it from her, and someday she'll surprise him.

"This feels right."

* * *

Three weeks later
FBI Headquarters
Washington, DC

Spender took one of the seats in front of the AD's desk.

"Any news?" he asked, by way of an opener. Skinner didn't look up at first. He

moved papers around.

"Theories. The warrants are still out. Not much active investigation since they aren't believed to be in the country or to pose a danger to the public. I think someone's just trying to keep them underground."

"Mulder's building, Hegal Place, was owned by a numbered holding company out of a shell office in St. Kitts," Spender said. "It sold last week, fire-sale price but still a lot of money, low seven figures."

"Really." Skinner's tone betrayed only mild professional interest. He stood, partially turning his back on the younger man to look out his office window.

"Want me to pass that on to anyone?" Spender offered.

"No," Skinner said, looking over his shoulder at the younger agent. "I don't think it's very relevant. Lot of people moving assets right now, getting into tech stocks. Coincidence."

Spender nodded assent. Skinner turned around, again looking at his desk as if to refresh his memory from notes.

"Anyway, Jeff, the reason I called you in here today. I'll get to the point--I need someone to take on the X-Files. I'd like you to do it, on a trial basis, give it six months and see how it goes. It's not a life sentence to the basement. If nothing else, you'll end up heading a division for a while, at least on paper."

"All right, sir."

"There's not much of a budget, so you're going to be alone for now. Over the next couple of months I'll try to shake loose enough for a partner for you, if we decide to keep the division going. Think about who you might want."

"I prefer brunettes."

"I've had enough of that for one decade. Go to bars like the rest of us." Skinner almost snapped, didn't appear to be making a joke. He opened one folder, removed another from inside it, and offered it to Spender. "Here. You'll probably need this

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one."

Red-bordered, hand-stamped, individually numbered like all of them. His first and his very own.

CASSANDRA SPENDER

"Be careful, Special Agent Spender."

* * *

the end

s o k o l

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bugs, without whom this would never have happened at all

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* * *

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* * *

Written in many cities in many countries, 1998-2006.
The truth really is out there.