

Truth in a Name

Mulder and Scully were working their way through the usual mountain of paperwork and casually trading barbs when the phone rang. "Mulder," he answered vaguely, keeping his eyes on the form in front of him but his attention on the game of solitaire on his computer.

"This is Kimberly, Agent Mulder. Assistant Director Skinner requests your and Agent Scully's presence in his office immediately."

"Okay, we'll be right there," he answered, shutting down the game as he hung up the phone. He looked over at his partner and said, "Skinner wants to talk to us."

Instead of answering, Scully unobtrusively put her shoes back on and stood, beating Mulder to the door. "What'd you do this time, Mulder?" she asked casually once they were waiting for the elevator to come down to their floor in the bowels of the Hoover building.

"Why are you assuming that *I* did anything?" he asked in a wounded tone.

One of her eyebrows rose as the elevator dinged. "Because it usually WAS you," she answered dryly.

"I will have you know that I've been on my best behavior," he retorted. He added silently as they boarded the empty car.

Scully's other eyebrow rose, and she glanced at him for a moment. Apparently taking him at his word, she nodded then quietly mused, "In that case I wonder what was so important that he pulled you away from your game."

Mulder nearly choked but managed to keep his expression bland through sheer will. "Whatever do you mean, Agent Scully?" he asked calmly as they stepped out of the elevator on the correct floor.

Instead of answering, she led the way toward their boss's office. His assistant, Kimberly, nodded at them and indicated the open door. "Go right in, Agents. He's expecting you."

With an absent, "Thank you," Mulder ushered Scully into the office with a light hand to her back. They took two guest chairs at their superior's invitation.

Skinner looked up at them and closed the folder that had held his attention. "Agents, one week ago a state park ranger in Montana disappeared. His body was discovered two days ago near the small town of Lythos, the apparent victim of an animal attack." He pushed the folder to Scully and watched her open it and start to peruse the information.

Mulder just looked confused. "Why are we being asked to look into it? Sir," he added, almost as an afterthought.

Scully answered, "This is very strange. There's evidence of multiple animals having attacked him."

Mulder frowned slightly and turned to her. "Pack of wolves?" he ventured.

She shook her head without looking up. "No, not multiple of the same animal; several different TYPES of animals. At least one large feline, a bear, and what could be your wolves. I can hardly see such a group cooperating, but according to the coroner's report on the ages of the wounds, that's what happened."

"Something wounded him and then something else finished him?" offered Mulder next. Skinner merely watched his two agents work on theories.

"No blood trail," disagreed Scully, looking at her partner with a slight frown of concentration. "Whatever got him, killed him on the spot."

"Maybe the cat took him down and then the wolf pack drove off the cat?"

"No blood from any of the animals, so they didn't fight over him. More importantly, though, is that almost none of his flesh was consumed. He was torn apart but not eaten."

Mulder looked at her blankly. "Why would wild animals kill him but then not eat him?"

"That's what you need to discover," Skinner entered the conversation again.

The two agents turned their attention away from each other and looked at their boss. "Why us?" wondered Mulder.

Skinner nodded toward Scully. "As Agent Scully has already pointed out, there are several inconsistencies in the situation. Kimberly already has all your arrangements made. Your plane leaves in two hours. Keep me informed."

The two agents stood at the obvious dismissal. "Yes, sir," Scully murmured politely as Mulder silently led her out.

Once safely inside the elevator, Mulder muttered just loud enough for Scully to hear, "Maybe he didn't taste very good."

The next morning found the agents entering the Wilde County Sheriff's Department. When the small bell above the door tinkled, the man sitting on a swivel chair looked up from behind his paper and asked, "Can I help you folks?"

"Agents Scully and Mulder," Scully said, holding up her badge and then indicating her partner. "We're here to talk to the sheriff."

The man stood, and they could see that he was wearing the brown uniform of a county sheriff. He was slightly on the heavy side, just over six feet tall, and had a full beard, mustache, and head of light brown hair. The sheriff barely gave Mulder's badge a glance, but he gave the agent a long, thorough stare. Mulder stared back stonily. Finally dismissing the quiet agent, he turned to Scully and smiled. Holding out a hand, he said, "Agent Scully. Welcome to Lythos. I'm Sheriff Lionel. How can I help you?" After shaking her hand, he sat back down and invited her to take a chair.

Inwardly raising an eyebrow at the uncharacteristic attention that she was getting (male law enforcement officers tended to either flirt with her or ignore her; nobody had ever treated her as the senior partner before), Scully gracefully took the indicated seat and launched into their reason for being here. "We understand that a park ranger was found nearby three days ago?"

Lionel nodded. He leaned back and removed a file from one of the cabinets behind his desk as he told her, "Yes. A couple was camping and hiking and found him. It's about two miles outside of town, but it's up in some pretty rugged country. Nobody's ever out there to speak of, so it's no wonder he wasn't spotted before. Actually, we're lucky that he was found this quickly. There're a lot of isolated spots around the area that aren't visited for years or decades at a time."

Scully started to go over the statement that had been taken from the campers. She read it through silently as she always did at this stage of an investigation. According to their pattern, Mulder would spend this time asking offbeat questions of the sheriff. However, the male agent kept his mouth shut and simply stared at Lionel. The sheriff ignored him completely.

Once Scully was done, she turned to her partner. "Nothing unusual here. Just a couple campers on vacation from Milwaukee." At his short nod, she turned back and addressed Lionel. "Where's the body?"

"The morgue in the hospital. Doctor Gaupe has performed an autopsy. I have that report around here somewhere." He leaned back and reached for the cabinet again.

"No need," Scully said with a slightly raised hand. Lionel stopped and returned his attention to her. She continued, "I've already seen it."

Lionel nodded and leaned forward in his seat again. "Doctor Gaupe knows the FBI is sending a team to investigate, so he knows to hold it."

"I'm a pathologist as well. Can I take a look at the body?"

"Shouldn't be a problem with that."

"Is there someone we can talk with about the local wildlife, sir?" asked Mulder quietly.

Lionel turned an amused glance to Mulder and replied, "Yes. You want to talk to Fox."

"Fox?" asked Scully with a quick glance at Mulder.

Lionel nodded. "Roland Fox. He's the local conservation officer. He can tell you about all the natural wildlife around here."

With a glance to her partner to see if he had any more questions, Scully stood and shook the sheriff's hand again. "Thank you, Sheriff Lionel. If you could direct us to Mister Fox, we'll be out of your hair."

He smiled. "No problem." He pointed out the door and then toward the left. "Out of here, turn left, left at the first street, it'll be Second Street, and he's the third house on the right. He works from home on Tuesdays, so he should be there."

Thanking him once again, Scully led the way out of the office. When they were safely on the street, she turned to Mulder and commented, "You're quiet."

He took a deep breath and gave her a smile. "Yeah, I guess he spooked me. Probably won't happen again."

One of her eyebrows came up. "Spooked YOU? I didn't think that was possible," she teased.

He made a self-deprecating face. "Ha, ha," he said sarcastically.

Smiling at his return to good humor, Scully turned back to enjoying the day. It was still morning yet, and it was looking to be a pretty summer day. Lythos was buried in the mountains of western Montana, but it had the feel of any small town in rural America. Homes with ancient trees lined both sides of the road, half of the porches had someone sitting there watching the world go by, and the requisite pack of children was playing some game in the middle of the street. All in all, it was a scene that would make Norman Rockwell drool with envy.

Approaching the home they'd been directed to, Scully mounted the steps and knocked.

It took perhaps fifteen seconds before the door was opened by a thin man with a long face. "May I help you?" he asked.

Scully showed him her badge. "Roland Fox?" she asked. At his nod, she continued, "I'm Agent Scully and this is Agent Mulder," she indicated her partner. The man turned his attention to Mulder as Scully explained why they were there, "Sheriff Lionel said we could talk to you about the local wildlife."

Fox stared at Mulder for a few seconds before visibly relaxing. "Sure, sure. Come on in," he invited, opening the door. He led the pair to the living room and offered drinks. When they declined, he seated himself, leaned back into the recliner, and asked, "What can I do for you?"

"As Agent Scully said, the sheriff said we could talk with you about the local wildlife." At Fox's nod, he continued, "Not that I'm questioning your credentials, but how extensive is your knowledge?"

"Mulder . . ." Scully trailed off in clear warning to play nice with the locals.

Fox smiled. "It's okay. I'm not offended by the question, Agent Scully." He turned back to Mulder and answered, "Officially, I'm employed by the Department of the Interior. Generally, I keep track of what animals are living in the area, watch for unauthorized hunting, and stuff like that."

Mulder nodded. "You heard about the park ranger killed a week ago?"

Fox's face fell. "Yes, I heard about John. Damn shame, that."

"John?" queried Scully. She knew the ranger's name, of course, but wanted to know how Fox knew of him.

"John Fullman. We've worked together on and off for years. We're in the same field, literally and figuratively. We met at a conference in Helena years ago and have been friends since. Backstopping each other's work, lending a hand when needed, and so on."

Before Mulder could ask his next question, the front door opened and four teenaged boys entered. They noisily headed for the stairs before noticing the trio on the couches. "Hi, Dad," one of the boys said, studying Mulder intently.

"Todd." Fox turned to Mulder and Scully and said, "This is my son Todd and his friends Randall, Waylon, and Caleb." He indicated the boys in turn as he named them off. He turned back to the children and said, "This is Agent Mulder and Agent Scully. They're here to investigate John's death," he explained to the boys.

All four boys' faces froze in position momentarily. Todd recovered first and walked up to Mulder, smiling and shaking his hand warmly. When he turned to Dana, he smiled slightly wider and shook her hand as well. After releasing her hand, he studied her for so long that she grew uncomfortable under the scrutiny. Todd turned to Mulder and said, "Quite the vixen you have here. She your mate?"

The three other boys gave a quick bark of laughter before muffling it immediately. Scully's eyes widened momentarily before she exclaimed, "Excuse me?!"

Todd suddenly realized his faux pas. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean -" he started to stammer.

Roland Fox stood and laid a hand on his son's shoulder. The boy quieted immediately and hung his head. Fox said, "I'm afraid I use a lot of terms from the animal kingdom around the house, Agent Scully. He wasn't trying to insult you; he was just asking if you two were married." He squeezed the boy's shoulder and added, "Though the etiquette could use a little work."

Todd looked up, blushing in embarrassment. "I'm really sorry, Agent Scully. I occasionally forget that not everyone thinks the same way we do."

Once she had the explanation behind the apparently tactless remark, Scully calmed down. She nodded to the boy and said, "Apology accepted."

Mulder had watched the entire exchange in growing amusement. "And no, she's not my mate," Mulder answered the original question.

Todd's face broke into a wide grin, and he took off up the stairs, his three friends laughing behind him.

Fox hid a smile behind his hand as Scully poked Mulder in the ribs.

Taking his seat again, Fox brought the conversation back on track. "What did you need to ask me?" A song by Snoop Doggy Dogg could be heard filtering down from upstairs. Fox looked up in annoyance before shaking his head and returning his attention to the agents.

"Have there been reports of animals attacking people around here?" asked Scully.

Fox shook his head. "Rarely. Aside from guard dogs attacking an intruder or something like that, I can only think of two instances in the past twenty years when a wild animal attacked a human. Both of those were cases of the person acting irresponsibly around an unpredictable animal. Besides, neither attack was fatal. I can't imagine what could have killed John, nor what he may have done to provoke such an attack."

"According to the autopsy, it was a group of animals working in concert who killed him: a bear, several large canines, and at least one large feline," Scully informed him.

Fox stared at her blankly. "We have bears, wolves, and a few mountain lions living around here, but they certainly wouldn't cooperate with each other."

"Doesn't surprise me, but what's the reasoning behind that?" asked Mulder.

"Bears only hunt fish. Mountain lions might hunt something as large as a human, and wolf packs could, but for just that reason they're competitors. They wouldn't cooperate." He frowned in thought and then continued. "The fact that such an attack happened at all is strange. A bear won't attack

unless provoked. Despite their size, they're mostly scavengers or fishers. They certainly wouldn't attack a full grown man except under extreme circumstances. Defending cubs, for instance. Mountain lions and wolf packs would much rather go after easier prey as well." He stared at the opposite wall in thought for a moment longer before shaking his head. "This whole scenario is strange. John is too good an outdoorsman to be caught in such a mess."

"Do you know where the body was found?" Mulder asked.

Fox nodded.

"Can you take us there?"

Fox nodded again and checked his watch. "I'm right in the middle of something here, so if you don't mind, I'd like to postpone that until tomorrow. You two staying at the Wilderness Lodge?" At Mulder's nod, he said, "I'll be by tomorrow morning at seven then if that's okay by you two."

Mulder drove them down the rutted driveway toward the home of the man that Fox said owns the land where Ranger Fullman's body was found. Scully had her feet braced on the floor, one hand on the divider between the seats and the other gripping the door handle. Mulder was braced as well as he could be, but he had to keep one foot and both hands controlling the vehicle. He was going slowly, but he still got thrown around a lot more than his partner did.

He finally pulled up in front of a log cabin and stopped the car. Scully got out to stretch out the kinks and looked around appraisingly. The view was incredible. The town of Lythos was around the mountain, so the only sign of humanity was the truck and cabin they were next to. Other than that, the whole world that she could see consisted entirely of picturesque mountains and pine forests. She turned toward the cabin in question and altered her initial impression immediately. It WAS a log cabin, but that wasn't to say that it wasn't a thoroughly modern place. A short-wave antenna ran up along the chimney and jutted further into the sky. The truck that Mulder had parked next to was only about two years old, and she could see the top half of a small satellite dish on the roof.

On the other side of the car, Mulder stretched out his back and groaned.

"Gonna make it, partner?" Scully asked in amusement.

"I'll live, but I'll be black and blue for a few weeks. Kiss and make it better?" he asked in his usual teasing tone.

"You wish," was her automatic retort.

Mulder gave a soundless sigh and silently agreed with her comment as he scanned the scene. "Gorgeous place," he commented.

"Sure is," she agreed, drinking in the panorama again.

Shaking off the spell that the scene was invoking, Mulder said, "When Fox called the driveway 'rough' I wasn't expecting one step down from a logging trail."

A deep laugh from around the corner of the cabin interrupted anything Scully may have said. A six and a half foot tall man wearing two layers of flannel shirts and a pair of worn jeans stepped into view, resting an axe over one large shoulder. He strode past his truck and dropped the axe head to the ground and leaned the shaft against the truck's bumper without slowing his approach. "Ah'm Orson. You two must be those FBI Agents Lionel told me about."

"Yes," Scully confirmed. "I'm Agent Scully, and this is Agent Mulder."

Orson barely glanced at Mulder but stopped in front of Scully and shook her hand with a smile. "What can Ah do for you, Agent Scully?"

His voice was in a slow drawl, but it wasn't truly Southern. She wondered absently where he'd picked it up. "Did you hear about the park ranger found on your property, sir?" she asked.

He nodded, his pleasant smile immediately falling away. "Yes, Ah did. Terrible shame, that. Lionel came out here two days ago and asked me about it. As Ah told him, Ah didn't hear nuthin' that night."

"How far away is it?"

He turned and pointed further up the mountain and around away from town. "Up a coupla hundred feet and most o' the way around the mountain. 'Bout three miles by foot from here, Ah guess."

"When was the last time you were up there, sir?" Scully asked next.

Orson shrugged. "This spring. Ah walk all mah property each spring to make sure nuthin' happened."

"Were you aware that it was a couple of hikers who found the body?"

He shrugged again. "Mah property runs along the state forest. Ah don't mind hikers and campers so long as they don't hurt anythin'."

Scully nodded. That explained why the park ranger and hikers were on private property. "One last question, sir," Scully continued.

Orson raised a hand and smiled. "Ah'm not 'sir' to anyone. Call me Orson."

Scully smiled slightly and nodded. "Very well, Orson. Would you mind if Roland Fox, Agent Mulder, and myself went out there tomorrow morning?"

"Fine by me," Orson said with a slight shrug. "Fox knows the best way up there, so you don't need no directions from me." He squinted up at the sun and said, "It's gettin' about lunch time. Would you two like to join me? Ah'm afraid it's only grilled fish, but Ah can guarantee it's the freshest you'll ever have." He smiled timidly at Scully and awaited her response.

She smiled slightly back. "Thank you for the offer, Orson, but I'm afraid we have to be going. Thank you for all your help."

"Mah pleasure, Agent Scully," he said, shaking her hand again.

"Orson," Mulder called softly as the large man turned back toward his axe. When he got the man's attention, Mulder continued, "What's with the axe?"

"Ah was choppin' wood for mah fireplace when Ah heard you pull up, Agent."

Mulder nodded and said, "Thank you for your time, sir," he mumbled as he quickly retreated back into the car.

Orson smiled at Mulder's hasty escape. Turning back to Scully he said, "If you try to come up here again, Ah'd suggest using a truck."

Scully grinned back. "Yeah, we'll do that. Have a nice day."

"Take care now."

The agents made it back into town without any major mishaps on the driveway and decided that they should take a lunch break before Scully looked over the body. Mulder shepherded Scully through the door to the "Lythos Café" with his hand in its usual spot on her back. The instant he made it through the door, he stopped in his tracks and looked intently around the room.

Scully, no longer feeling his presence following her, stopped and turned to him with a raised eyebrow. When she saw the look of near panic on his face, she turned and scanned the room herself. Most of the patrons had stopped their meals and were looking at Mulder with varying expressions. Most were neutral, a few were mildly friendly, and some were downright hostile. The tension slowly eased and people went back to their meals as Scully turned back to her partner. "Mulder?" she asked softly. She'd already dismissed the townspeople's reaction as typical reticence around someone they don't know. Besides, she was more worried about Mulder's reaction.

Taking a deep breath, Mulder composed himself. "I'm fine," he said quietly.

Her expression conveyed exactly how much she believed that, but she didn't say anything. Instead, a teenaged girl wearing a lightly stained apron and a hunter green shirt proclaiming "Lythos Café" came up and stopped in front of the agents. She glanced quickly between the two of them and focused on Scully. "Hi, I'm Beryl. Do you two want to sit at a booth, table, or at the counter?"

"Counter's fine," Scully answered absently, still worried about Mulder. He seemed to be pulling himself together, though.

"Seat yourselves, then," Beryl said. "Bernadette will be with you in a sec."

Nodding to the waitress, they made their way over to the counter and took seats. They glanced over the placemats cum menus for a few moments before a large, middle aged woman stopped in front of them. She dropped a glass of water in front of each and then silverware wrapped in a napkin. "I'm Bernadette. What'll you have?" she asked directly, pulling a notepad out of her apron.

Scully glanced up and said, "Tossed salad with light French dressing, if you have it."

Bernadette nodded and jotted down Scully's order. Mulder ordered a cheeseburger and fries. Bernadette turned and bellowed the order in the general direction of the kitchen. The agents heard an acknowledgement that wasn't completely polite.

"Colorful place," Mulder muttered to Scully once the waitress had walked off.

"It grows on you," Roland Fox said, taking a seat next to Mulder. Bernadette didn't even bother to come over. She just raised her eyebrows at Fox. At his nod, she turned and shouted an order for a grilled chicken sandwich toward the kitchen. Fox was clearly a regular. He smiled at Scully's rolled eyes. "Seriously, it is a nice place once everyone knows you." He turned to Mulder and said, "You might want to consider retiring here in a few years, Agent Mulder."

Mulder smiled slightly. "I'll keep that in mind, but I don't intend on retiring anytime soon."

Fox shrugged. "Suit yourself. I just thought you could fit into our little community well."

Scully stared at him. she thought in amazement.

She was about to comment on the unlikelihood of that concept when Mulder smoothly interrupted, "We talked with Orson. He has no problem with the three of us going hiking tomorrow morning on his property."

Fox smiled. "And I'll bet he invited you to a grilled fish lunch." His smile widened at Scully's surprised expression. "You should have taken him up on

it. He really DOES do the best grilled fish I've ever tasted."

Mulder smiled slightly. "Maybe tomorrow, then."

Bernadette came by and placed Fox's chicken sandwich down, and Mulder's burger and fries down as well. Fox looked with disgust at Mulder's plate. "Do you have ANY idea how much cholesterol is on that plate, Agent Mulder?"

Scully laughed. "Don't bother, Mister Fox. I've tried reforming him for years. Hasn't happened yet."

Fox shrugged as Bernadette placed Scully's salad down. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

Scully thanked the waitress and started poking through the salad as the two men tore into their sandwiches and started a conversation about paranormal happenings in the area.

Scully felt someone slip onto the stool next to her. She looked over shortly and found a young man appraising her openly. He was probably just out of school, based on the high school letter jacket he was wearing. He continued to study her for a few more moments before she asked, "Can I help you?"

He smiled and said, "You know, if you keep eating stuff like that you'll turn into a rabbit?"

Fox jumped into the conversation. "Ty, you really don't want to bother us."

"Who's gonna stop me, FOX? You?" he asked in a sneer.

Mulder turned enough to notice two more guys and two girls all wearing the same school colors standing near Ty. One of the boys said, "Come on, man. This isn't worth it."

One of the girls wrapped an arm over Ty's shoulder and tried to gently pull him away.

He shrugged her off and said over his shoulder, "Stuff it, Leo. Can't you see I'm talking to the lady?"

"Were," Scully said in a cold, flat voice. "WERE talking to the lady," she repeated.

His eyebrows rose in mocking surprise. "Oh, oh. She bites back." He glanced at Mulder and asked, "Have you tamed her yet?"

Mulder kept his seat only through a force of will. "I'd suggest you leave her alone," he said with a definite threat in his voice.

Ty smiled widely and asked, "Or what?"

Bernadette, who had approached without anybody noticing, grabbed him by the front of his jacket and hauled him halfway over the countertop to come face to face with her. "Or you'll answer to me. Any questions, cub?"

He was obviously wary of getting into a fight with Bernadette. Doing his best to keep his fear from showing on his face, he defiantly said, "Sure, whatever. All she had to do was ask."

Bernadette dropped him, and he fell into an undignified heap behind the stool he'd previously been sitting on. Bernadette smiled at him, but it wasn't pleasant. "Now I would suggest you leave my diner."

Scraping together his tattered dignity, he turned and headed toward the door.

To pour salt on the wound, Bernadette added, "Leo, Namir, Ariel, Yvette, you're welcome to stay."

The four shared a look before Leo nodded and headed over to one of the larger booths. His three friends followed. Beryl looked over to Bernadette with an obvious question in her eyes.

Bernadette nodded and said, "Take your break, girl."

Beryl immediately nodded and joined the foursome, sliding in and snuggling next to the other boy who put an arm around her.

Ty had watched the entire defection with mounting anger. He walked back over to the group and stared down at the girl who had tried to pull him away earlier. "I'm leaving, Ariel." By his tone, it was obvious that he expected her to follow.

She looked up at him mildly. "Bye, bye."

The other four at the table kept their laughter from becoming too loud but didn't even try to choke it off completely.

Ty looked like he was about to explode. Red faced and with his fists clenched, he turned and stalked back to the door, batting the busboy out of the way as he did so.

Beryl stood and looked over at the boy as he pulled himself back to his feet. "You okay, Arulo?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine," he said hurriedly. He scampered back to his push cart and went back to work.

The excitement over, everyone else went back to their meals.

"That was fun," Scully said facetiously.

Fox grinned slightly. "Typical beta male posturing. Leo's the leader of that group, but Ty had to challenge his authority. He was beat down decisively, so he'll know his place next time. Whether you're talking about animals or adolescents, it's all really the same."

Mulder smiled. "Is there a difference between animals and adolescents?"

Fox chuckled. "Sometimes."

Scully smiled in spite of herself.

Scully knocked on Mulder's door at the hotel that evening after getting back from looking at Fullman's body.

"Come on in," Mulder called.

Scully entered and closed the door behind herself, taking in the scene quickly. Mulder had apparently ordered a pizza and was nearly through his half of it. He had several pages and photographs spread around himself on the bed he was sitting on. Scully walked over and picked up the pizza box. Taking a seat on the other bed, she started working on her supper.

Mulder stood gingerly so as not to disrupt the pages. Once up, he pulled a Diet Coke out of the ice bucket. He handed it to her, and she smiled radiantly at him. "Oh, bless you, Mulder."

He smiled. "You looked like you could use it. Anything interesting on your end?"

She shook her head as she cracked the seal. "Not really. I found -"

He waved her off. "Keep eating. I'll tell you what I found first." Once he had her nod of acknowledgement, he said, "I did research all this afternoon. No significant records of animal attacks aside from Mister Fox's two instances. One was a group of fraternity brothers camping. They decided to try to lure a wolf into camp."

Scully stared at him incredulously, drink halfway up to her mouth. "WHY?!"

Mulder grinned. "Well, all the interviews started with the phrase, 'We'd been drinking . . . ' and ended with, 'We wanted to catch a mascot for our school.'"

Scully rolled her eyes. "Next instance?" she asked before going back to her slice of veggie pizza.

"A guy woke up in the middle of the night to strange sounds in his camp. He got up to investigate and found a bear eating the fish he'd caught the day before. He tried to chase the bear off by throwing rocks at it. Little did he know that the momma bear's cub was also right there. The first rock hit the cub. Poor guy broke his leg running from the bear, who only chased him twenty yards or so anyway."

Trying to muffle the snickers, Scully said, "Okay, I guess those count as provoked attacks, just like Mister Fox said. Anything else?"

Mulder shook his head. "Not really. There have been various unresolved missing persons reports from here and the surrounding counties, but no more than you'd expect in a wilderness region like this. All things considered, I'm not coming up with much."

Scully stared at Mulder. "Who are you, and what have you done with Mulder?"

He stared back at her in confusion.

She burst into laughter at his expression. Finally regaining use of her voice, she said, "You've got to admit, Mulder, if nothing else, you've always blamed alien experimentation."

Mulder shook his head solemnly. "Not here. Reticulans have this unreasoning fear of the scent of pine. They won't come near this place."

His expression was so serious that it took Scully a few seconds to see the slight twinkle in his eye. She broke down into laughter again. This time he smiled with her.

Scully wiped the tears from her eyes and said, "Nothing of note from my autopsy. Doctor Gaupe did a thorough job the first time through. There's a little more swelling around the claw and bite marks than I would have expected, but not enough to matter."

Mulder nodded absently, clearly thinking of something else.

Scully left him to his quiet contemplation as she finished her supper. About the time that she was throwing the empty pizza box into the trash, Mulder slowly surfaced from whatever realm had held his attention.

"Back with me?" Scully asked, taking her seat on the bed and absently rubbing her neck.

He smiled sheepishly. "I didn't leave, did I?" He scooted off his bed and transferred himself over to the other, sitting behind Scully. "Here, let me," he said as he gently pushed her hands away. Once her hands made way, he started to gently massage her neck and shoulders.

"Hmm," Scully once nearly hummed. "That feels good. And to answer the question: No, you didn't leave physically, but mentally you were somewhere else."

"There are people who would tell you that I've been mentally somewhere else for quite some time now," he said humorously.

She smiled slightly.

As he continued to work, he commented, "Your shoulders are a mess."

She almost shrugged, but the muscles in question were too close to a liquid state to take any attempt seriously. "Comes from being jostled around in a car and then hunched over an autopsy table for hours."

"Oh, Scully, I'm sorry. I didn't even think about that when you said you were going to do the autopsy."

"I'm fine, Mulder," she responded with her predictable catchphrase.

He sighed but didn't argue the point as he finished up.

She sighed once and slowly rotated her shoulders and neck. "Hmm, thank you. That felt wonderful. Your turn."

He gave her a dazzling smile as she turned around to face him. "You're volunteering to make me feel wonderful?"

She smacked him lightly on the knee. "Your shoulders and neck, Mulder. Lose the shirt and lay on your stomach."

"Much as I love the idea of losing my shirt at your direction, I'm afraid my shoulders and neck don't hurt," he commented with theatrical dejection.

She frowned at him. "You got thrown around a lot worse than I did during that drive. How aren't you bruised?"

"I took a hot shower shortly after I dropped you off at the hospital," he replied, a bit hurriedly.

She shrugged. "Fine, then. I WON'T give you a backrub. 'Night, Mulder." She stood and headed to the connecting door to her room.

He groaned and dropped back onto the bed, hand over his eyes. "You're an evil, evil woman."

"If my NOT giving you a backrub qualifies as the most evil thing in your life, Mulder, then I think your life is in pretty good shape," she called, stepping through into her room.

"If you only knew," he whispered to the empty room.

Dana Scully took a deep breath of the clean mountain air. Having lived on navy bases for most of her early life, she had occasionally gotten far enough out on the water to not be able to smell the land any longer. She had always enjoyed the salt flavored air out there.

Now she was enjoying a new flavor of the same thing. She closed her eyes as she savored the crisp tang of pine scented atmosphere, untainted by pollutants.

Fox smiled at her. "You seem to be enjoying the great outdoors, Agent Scully," he commented.

She smiled without opening her eyes. "We live and work in the greater Washington, DC area. Many of our cases take us into cities, sewers, abandoned homes, and other not-so-pleasantly-smelling places." She took another breath, letting it out slowly. "I'm just enjoying air you don't have to chew or disinfect."

Mulder chuckled, and Fox's smile widened. "I told you this place would grow on you," Fox teased lightly.

Scully's mouth twisted into a slight grin. Opening her eyes, she looked over at the conservation officer. "No, you told Mulder that."

Fox shook his head. "No, I told BOTH of you that."

Mulder dropped his handful of sunflower seed shells to the ground and stood. "Speaking of planning our retirement, we'd better get moving again before that dreaded day gets any closer."

Fox stood and brushed bread crumbs off of his hands. "You aren't looking forward to retirement?" he asked.

"Mulder thrives on the action and challenges of work," Scully said as her partner helped her to her feet. "He'd go crazy within a week from the inactivity that retirement would bring."

"I've heard the argument that I'm already well past that point, but what she said sounds better," Mulder said, deadpan.

Fox chuckled and shook his head. "You two are quite a pair. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"Oh, once or twice," Scully said dryly.

Fox settled his small backpack on again and said, "Okay, the land is pretty monotonous from here to where John was found. Agent Scully, if you'd

care to pull out your handy-dandy GPS and lead the way?"

She nodded and pulled the hand held device from the clip on her belt and compared her current location to the coordinates that the crime scene listed. She took a bearing on a tree with an unusual fork in it halfway up its trunk and headed out.

Mulder fell into step beside Fox. "I may have to tell her," he muttered, quietly enough that Scully couldn't hear.

Fox nodded solemnly. "Maybe. Frankly, I'm thankful it's your decision and not mine."

"Thanks," Mulder grumbled.

Fox shrugged. "Can she put it together?"

Mulder thought about the scientifically-bound young agent who had walked into his office with all the naiveté and idealism in the world all those years ago. Then he thought about all the things she'd seen since then. "Probably," he admitted finally.

"Then you don't really have a choice, do you?" Fox asked.

"No," Mulder answered, dejected.

Scully led them unerringly to the crime scene within an hour.

The body was long gone, of course. The police hadn't bothered stringing up the yellow crime scene tape. The only proof of what had happened were the splashes of blood that a variety of insects were slowly cleaning up.

Pulling out a set of photographs, Scully compared them to the scene and tried to determine what direction Fullman had been running from when he was killed. She finally started pacing off and slowly scanning a twenty degree arc, which was her best guess.

Mulder slowly spiraled outward from the body in all directions. He eventually found what he'd been looking for and stared at it in thought. Now his choice was whether to bring it to Scully's attention.

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending upon one's point of view, the decision was taken from him. Scully had seen him staring at the ground and came over. "Whatcha got, Mulder?" She followed his line of sight and saw the large paw print that held his attention. She looked up at their guide who'd been quietly watching from his seat on a fallen log nearby. "Mister Fox, can you come over here, please?"

Fox stood and crossed over to them, staring down at the print for a few seconds before heading back to his backpack. He rejoined the silent partners with a battered book, a tape measure, and a pair of dividers. He silently took a few measurements and then thumbed through the book until he stopped at a page and compared a print silhouette to the impression on the ground. Nodding finally, he said, "This appears to be a paw print of a four hundred pound Bengal tiger."

Scully stared at Fox. "Tiger," she stated.

Fox shrugged, quietly closing the book and folding his arms.

"That doesn't make any sense!" Scully objected. "There aren't any zoos or circuses nearby where it could have escaped from. Besides, if such a thing DID happen, it would be all over the news."

Fox said nothing. Mulder was still staring at the print, lost in thought. Scully finally said, "It has to be a prank. There's no other explanation for why this thing would be here."

"Probably right," Mulder said neutrally.

She detected his tone and looked at him sharply. "What do you mean, Mulder?"

He shrugged. "You're right. The only way a Bengal tiger print could be here is if it was planted."

She continued to stare at him. "But you don't think that's what happened," she accused.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," he said in a voice devoid of inflection.

She shook her head and turned to continue her own search. Fox and Mulder shared a look before Mulder returned to the spot where the body had been found. He stayed there and stared off into space as Fox took his seat again.

It was two minutes later when Scully called out, "Over here, guys."

Mulder slowly refocused on the situation at hand and walked over to his partner, dreading what he would find.

Sure enough, Fox was already there, measuring a whole bunch of smaller prints. Scully walked off before Fox came up for air and resumed Mulder's spiral search. Mulder watched Fox work.

With a weary sigh, Fox abandoned what he was doing and looked up at Mulder. "You know what these are, don't you?"

Mulder nodded slightly. "Small wolf pack?"

Fox nodded in agreement. "At least three."

Mulder rubbed his hand over his eyes. "Do you know who?" he asked.

Fox shrugged, looking back down at his book. "I can guess, but does it really matter?"

Mulder leaned tiredly against a tree. "No, I guess not."

Scully walked back up to the men and asked, "Anything?"

Fox nodded absently. "Grey wolves, at least three and probably five or six, though I can't prove it."

Scully went back over to the log where all their backpacks were and absently tore open a granola bar as she looked over the whole scene. Her mind worked furiously, producing hypotheses and discarding them as she found holes in the logic.

"This just doesn't make sense," she quietly insisted to herself. "A bear, large cats, and the wolves all killed him in cooperation but didn't eat him. If that print is genuine, then it was a tiger which definitely shouldn't be here. Why would such a group kill him in the first place? He's an experienced ranger, so he shouldn't have done anything stupid. It's almost like those animals were ORDERED to kill him."

"Not quite, but you're tracking in the right direction," a new voice said, interrupting her thoughts.

To Scully's absolute astonishment, Sheriff Lionel stepped around a large tree and stopped ten feet away from her. Neither Mulder nor Fox so much as blinked.

"Sheriff?" Scully asked. "What are you doing here?"

Lionel sighed sadly and said, "Hoping you wouldn't figure it out."

Scully pulled her SigSauer out and pointed it at the sheriff faster than he could react. "What are you talking about? Figure WHAT out?" She glanced over at her partner and was amazed to see him quietly watching the scene being played out. His gun was still not in evidence. "Mulder, what's going on?" she asked, returning her attention to the completely calm sheriff.

Mulder ignored his partner for the moment. Instead, he addressed the sheriff and asked, "Do you know who did it and why?"

Lionel nodded. "I do, and because he saw too much."

Fox sighed and nodded sadly. "I was afraid of that."

"What are you all talking about?" Scully demanded, a note of uncertainty creeping into her voice.

Mulder turned and stepped toward Scully, keeping out of her line of fire. Not that the gun would do her any good, but he wanted to keep her as calm as possible. "Did you know that there are groups who take a lot of stock in names, Scully?" he began conversationally.

"What does that have to do -" she began, keeping her attention on the sheriff who was now sadly looking at the blood stains on the ground.

Mulder ignored her interruption. "Your name, for instance. Dana is a short form of Daniele. It roughly translates to 'God is my judge'."

"I know that, Mulder. What's your point?"

"Orson is Latin for bear," he went on. "Ty is sometimes short for Tyger. Leo, Ariel, Yvette, and," he waved at the calm sheriff, "Lionel all translate to lion. Randall and Waylon are wolf."

She interrupted his recital. "Okay, so all these people are named for animals. So?"

"You're not listening," he chided gently. "I'm saying that their names are WHAT they are."

Scully's eyes went wide. "You CAN'T be serious. You're trying to tell me that Sheriff Lionel is a LION!?"

Lionel smiled slightly. "Have you ever heard of lycanthropy, Agent Scully?"

She scoffed. "There's no such thing. According to myth, it bestowed an animal form on the person cursed with it, like some kind of disease. There IS a psychological condition where the person THINKS they're an animal, but no physical change occurs."

Lionel smiled. He closed his eyes and concentrated for a few seconds before his form began to blur. Scully couldn't tear her eyes away from what her mind flatly told her was a complete impossibility. Impossible or not, Lionel slowly changed form into a fully grown lion before her very eyes. Lionel calmly sat down and regarded the dumbfounded woman before him.

Scully abruptly sat down on the ground. Mulder couldn't tell if it was intentional or if her legs had just stopped working. He stepped to her side and squatted down next to her. She was still staring at the lion who levelly stared back. "Scully, are you okay?" he asked when she hadn't uttered a sound for a full minute.

She slowly shook her head in denial. "That's not possible," she finally stated, pointing at the lion with the gun still clutched in her now shaking hand.

"Yes, it is," Mulder calmly said.

She tore her eyes from the lion and looked into her partner's eyes. She saw concern mixed with absolute conviction. "NO," she said, standing suddenly and beginning to pace. She walked back and forth over the same five feet or so, quietly muttering to herself, making emphatic hand gestures. "Some sort of hallucinogen, probably. Maybe the tumor has come back and I'm having a hallucination. A dream? Yeah, that may be it." She kept pacing and waving her arms in the air, completely ignoring the fact that she still had her gun in one hand.

Mulder finally stood and grabbed her by the shoulders. That instantly snapped her out of her self-absorption and pacing. Taking ten quick steps backwards, she leveled her gun at Mulder and screamed, "Stay back! I don't know who or what you are, but I want some answers right now!"

Mulder stayed where he was. "I've told you the truth, Scully," he said quietly.

Roland Fox stepped beside Mulder and stated clearly, "As hard as this is to accept, Agent Scully, he really is telling the truth."

She laughed. Mulder thought it sounded slightly unbalanced. "And I suppose YOU are a real fox then?" she asked Fox sarcastically.

Fox sighed. Frowning slightly, his image also blurred. Within seconds, a small, reddish-brown fox stood where Roland Fox had been. Mulder leaned forward and let the fox scamper up his arm to sit on one shoulder with its tail loosely wrapped around the back of his neck.

Scully stared between the lion, fox, and Fox Mulder. His given name and the fact that he'd been so calm through all of this suddenly crystallized in one shocking moment.

For the first time in her life, Special Agent Dana Katherine Scully had a stress induced blackout.

Scully moaned and brought one hand to her head, not yet daring to open her eyes.

Mulder was there instantly. "Scully, you okay?"

She groaned louder and pressed her fingers to her forehead. "What happened?" she asked thickly, trying to sort through her memory.

"You passed out," Mulder said with no small amusement.

"What? Why? I don't -" Memory came flooding back, and she sat bolt upright. She immediately told herself that it HAD to be a dream, and she slowly leaned back in the bed again. Abruptly realizing she was in a bed she didn't recognize, she scanned the room. "Where am I?"

"Orson's place. Lionel went for help when you passed out, and Orson carried you back here."

Nodding slightly, she brought both hands to her temples and started rubbing. "You won't believe what kind of dream I had, Mulder."

He grinned softly. "Yes, I do, because it wasn't a dream."

Her hands stopped mid-motion. She slowly lowered them a little to look fearfully at her partner. "Please tell me you're kidding," she pleaded.

"Afraid not," he said regretfully. "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" he finished with a sad smile.

She stared at him as her hands slowly dropped to her lap. "And foxes?" she asked in a whisper, keeping her gaze locked onto his.

Within moments, a snow white fox sat on the floor where Mulder had been kneeling. Scully stared into the intelligent hazel eyes of the fox for a moment before her mind began to shut down again. She brought her knees up and wrapped her arms around her legs. Placing her forehead on her knees, she curled herself into a little ball and started rocking.

Mulder jumped up on the bed lightly and circled around to her other side. He laid belly down on the bed and watched Scully for a few moments. She continued to silently rock. He crept forward and poked his nose under her elbow, lifting the arm slightly. Scully stopped rocking and lifted her arm, looking at him through teary eyes. He backed off a little and laid his head back down.

Scully burst into crying laughter. She let her legs stretch out on the bed again and rested her hand on the fox's back. "You know, Queequeg used to do that very same thing," she said.

Mulder raised his head, his ears cocked, and he tilted his head in an obvious question.

She chuckled and explained, "When I was feeling down, he would poke his nose under my arm and then look pitiful until I got into a better mood and petted him."

Mulder crept forward a few inches and laid his head on her leg. He succeeded in looking pitiful again.

She burst into renewed laughter.

Having gotten the desired reaction, Mulder hopped off the bed and reformed into his human shape. He retrieved the gun and holster from where he'd left them sitting on the bed stand and said, "We'd better go out there and finish this up before anyone gets jumpy."

Taking a moment to steady her nerves, Scully stood and laid one hand on Mulder's arm. "Will you explain all this to me?"

Mulder nodded and pulled her into a hug. "Yes, eventually. Right now we need to convince Lionel that you aren't a threat."

"We aren't dangerous, Agent Scully. We just want to quietly live with our own," Sheriff Lionel concluded an hour later.

"What happened with Ranger Fullman?" Scully asked.

Orson walked over with five plates of grilled fish and distributed them around the table. "He saw me fishin' in the stream."

Scully looked at him expectantly. "Okay . . ."

Orson smiled and continued as he sat down, "Ah didn't know he was there. When Ah changed back to mah man-form, he took off, scared as a rabbit. Turns out Namir was nearby and went back into town for help."

"Leopard," Mulder whispered into her ear.

Orson nodded, having heard the aside, and continued, "He found Tora and the Lupas, and they came out and helped me corner the ranger. We tried to talk with him, but he wouldn't listen. He finally pulled out a gun and started shooting. We had to kill him in self-defense."

Scully stared with a bite of fish halfway to her mouth. "He missed? How could he miss a bear?"

Orson shook his head. "Naw, he didn't miss. Not that it matters none."

Mulder said, "In our animal form we heal pretty quick, based on size. A small caliber gunshot to a bear would have healed in a few days if it didn't kill him outright."

"Which it obviously didn't," Lionel added. He looked over at Orson and grinned. "Not that a bullet would get through that thick skull of his anyway."

Orson stopped chewing and stared at Lionel. Swallowing, he said calmly, "Watch what you say, kitty."

Fox started laughing so hard that he began choking.

Mulder thumped him on the back a few times while Lionel glared at Fox. Fox made a valiant effort to bring himself under control, which he slowly did.

"Uh . . ." Scully had no idea how to react.

Orson grinned. "Don't you worry about it. Our social structure is difficult to explain. Simply put, dogs and cats don't get along. But they're in the den of a neutral member of the Joined, so it isn't a problem."

Her gaze flicked from one man to the other before stopping at Mulder's suppressed grin. "Okay," she finally agreed.

The meal slowly progressed. Scully quietly pushed her food around while everyone else made small talk. Finally she pushed the plate away and asked, "Now what?"

Silence abruptly descended in the room. After a few moments, Orson stood and quietly began clearing the dishes. Lionel leaned back and stared at her intently. "I hope you understand that I won't let you reveal our little secret."

Scully nodded. "I won't. Not if it endangers my partner."

Lionel pursed his lips and said, "You know, the easiest answer would be to bring you into my pride or one of the other various families of the Joined."

"No," Mulder stated flatly. He stared at Lionel and gritted his teeth in anger.

Lionel looked more amused by the display of bravado than anything else. "But I guess it isn't really necessary," Lionel finally allowed with a half grin.

Mulder gradually relaxed.

Scully released a breath she didn't even realize she'd been holding. Though the concept fascinated her, she definitely wanted to know more before even approaching such a subject.

Lionel looked up at Orson and said, "Thanks for the meal, Orson. I appreciate it."

Orson nodded and smiled at everyone. "Mah pleasure. Not often that Ah have visitors."

Lionel waved everyone else toward the door and said, "I'll give you folks a ride back into town if you want."

"Yes, I DO enjoy being scratched behind my ears, but no, I WON'T sleep at the foot of your bed to keep your feet warm."

Lionel chuckled and shook his head as he dropped the FBI agents off at their hotel.

" . . . and I will NOT travel in a pet cage the next time the airline is short a seat! Do you have ANY idea of the conditions in the cargo compartment?"

"But Mulder, think of all the money we could save," Scully said in a teasing tone.

Lionel started laughing out loud as he drove away. He had the feeling he'd be seeing those two again. One way or another.
