

Band of Gold

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What time is it?"

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

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

Skinner absolutely did not permit himself to look at Mulder's crotch. "Sure. Big Mac okay?"

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

"Right now, I'd even take a MacRib."

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

"Thank you, sir. How much do I owe you?"

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

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

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

"I'm taking a shower—you need to use the john first?"

Not a glance at him. "No, I'm fine."

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

Damn.

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

"Fine," Skinner muttered, and left him to it.

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

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

Fine.

It was all fucking fine.

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





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

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

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

More out there than usual.

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

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

Then went in to face Mulder.

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

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

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

Nice to know everything was still fine.

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

Very deliberately, Skinner unclenched his jaw.

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

He could feel Mulder looking at him.

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

There was no getting away from it. Not tonight.

If he was honest, not for a long time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh yeah. Everything was just fine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh yeah, everything was just fine.

Sleep was no nearer, and neither was Mulder,





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

“It wasn’t the ring.”

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

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

“Not having sex with you tonight.”

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

“It hasn’t stopped me before.”

“But it stopped you tonight.”

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

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

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

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

“Why what?”

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

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

“It’s been there for a long time—”

“Like a magic trick.”

“Meaning?”

“Now you see it, now you don’t.”

“We already talked about this—”

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

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

Fuck.

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

“Didn’t I?”

The silence grew, again.

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

And hanging over it all, the pall of silence.

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

He could feel Mulder listening to him in the dark.

“Neither do I.”

“But you’re not—”

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

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

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

Waiting, to hear Mulder’s reaction to that.

Nothing.

And then:

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

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

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

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

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

Rigid muscles against him, a fine trembling arising.

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

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

Time crawling past, moribund.



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

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

