

The sound of retreating footsteps on loose gravel grated through Mulder's skull. The cut on the bridge of his nose throbbed, and blood was now flowing down his face, into his mouth. He spat and took a gasping breath, twisting his body in order to get a view of his assailants, but it was no good. His hands and ankles were bound, the wet rocks of the lakeshore digging into his arms and back, preventing him from getting a good look at the men in black suits who had done this. He was helpless, and Skully wasn't there.

The morning was foggy, and the air smelled like fish. They had driven all night to get to this remote lake, following the story of a little girl who had disappeared, taken from this very shore.

Skully didn't think the case belonged in the X-Files, quoting the published statistics on runaways and abductions perpetrated by family members. She didn't believe the mother's story, who had described the creature's blue-ish skin, fish-like fins, and monstrous set of razor-sharp teeth. Mulder had grabbed all the material he could find on the folklore of the Orkney Finfolk, the Irish Merrows, and even the Sirens of ancient Greece that he had lying around his closet of an office, and spent the night reading while Skully drove.

"Let's find a motel for the night," Skully had suggested, rubbing her eyes with one hand and steering with the other. "It's late." There was a tone in her voice that Mulder knew well. It meant that she thought he was being ridiculous and she didn't want to have to say it. Skully often sounded like that, but there was no malice in the tone. In fact, Mulder took her withheld remarks as a sign of trust and respect. She would go along with any crazy scheme he cooked up without a single complaint - as long as she could rub it in his face when he turned out to be wrong.

"Her name's Alice. She's only eight," he replied grimly, reminding her of the impetus for their haste.

Skully sighed deeply, but said nothing, letting the car drift a few miles per hour over the speed limit.

*Shplock!* A loud wet sound pulled Mulder out of his reverie. His eyes sprang open, and for a moment his vision swam. He shook his head and strained his ears, trying to identify the sound, ignoring the pain in his ribs and his face.

*Shplock!* The same noise again, slightly closer. It was coming from the direction of the lake, which lay somewhere beyond the thick wall of fog at Mulder's feet. He lifted his head and forced himself to sit up, scraping his tied hands painfully on the stones as he did so.

"Hello?" he called out into the fog.

*Shplock!* The sound replied. It was a squishy slapping sort of noise, like a jell-o mold falling onto the floor. Mulder's pulse quickened, but the slow march of the approaching creature remained steady. *Shplock!*

Mulder quickly thought back to his hasty research in the car. The fish-man in all his forms was a water-dwelling creature. It was most dangerous at sea or in rivers and lakes, luring fishermen and explorers in and then pulling them under the waves to their deaths. Of course,

that's not to say they weren't deadly on land as well. The fish-man was said to wander inland to pick off young children and incapacitated prey.

*Shplock!* Mulder looked down at the twine that bound his feet. Incapacitated prey indeed! Suddenly the attack of the men in suits made perfect sense. The G-Men, or whoever they were, were giving an offering to the fish-man that lived in this lake. They had beaten him and tied him up so he would be easy pickings for this thing!

He spotted a sharp-looking rock a foot or so to his right, and he began flailing his body towards the make-shift knife. *Shplock!* It sounded like it was only a few feet away as Mulder swung his legs towards the serrated rock and began working away at the twine.

*Shplock!* As he worked, he looked up to see a large dark shape looming towards him through the fog. His eyes widened and he quickened his pace, though the twine was only fraying slightly. *Come on!* he thought. *Where are you, Skully!?*

A quarter-mile down the beach, Agent Dana Skully was looking for seashells. If she had slept at all that night, she would have probably objected to being sent on such an errand, but as it was, she was just operating on auto-pilot. She stopped walking, rubbed her tired eyes, and stared out at the blank whiteness of fog that hovered eerily over the lake.

The rational part of her mind told her that Mulder was being overly obsessive and downright indulgent on this case; driving all night just to look for evidence of some hairy fish-man. To add insult to injury, Mulder had asked her to go find a large conch-shell as soon as they arrived. He had justified the request by insisting that if the creature did exist, the only known ward was to blow into a conch shell horn. Skully had agreed, but only after Mulder promised to let them get some rest afterwards.

The thought of collapsing on some dingy motel-mattress roused her slightly, and she gave the stony beach a sweeping appraisal. There! She jogged over to a watermelon-sized rock, reached down, and picked up a huge, perfectly formed conch that had been lodged to the side of the rock. She smiled blearily before Mulder's panicked voiced drifted towards her from across the fog.

"Skully!" his voice echoed. "It's the fish-man!"

*Shplock!* Mulder scrambled backwards, ignoring the half-chewed twine that still bound his legs, trying to get away from the hideous creature. Although it was probably very graceful in the water, on land it seemed totally out of place. It was man-sized with blue-green scales covering its bloated, baggy wet skin. There was a tangled mat of damp black hair on its oversized head, and a huge toothy mouth grinned at him. It was gaining on him, approaching faster than he could back away.

*Shplock!* It lay an immensely powerful fin-like hand on his leg. Mulder shouted again. "Help!"

Suddenly, a loud, clear horn sounded some distance away, and the monster immediately released him, retreating quickly back into the fog and towards the lake beyond. The sound

blasted again as Skully appeared through the fog, poofy blouse billowing, running as fast as she could down the beach while still blowing into the shell.

At the same moment, a half-dozen men in dark suits erupted from the forest all around them. The G-Men ran past Mulder and into the fog carrying handguns and nets, clearly trying to head off the creature. They all disappeared into the fog as Skully reached the spot that he lay.

"Skully!" he shouted, a smile on his bloody face. "Did you see it?!"

"Mulder, what happened to you?" she said, panicked, as she dropped the conch and began cutting the twine with a small pocket knife.

"Did you see the fish-man?" he insisted as his hands were freed. The sounds of a man screaming and water splashing through the fog filled the air for a moment.

"Who are these men?" she asked, ignoring his question. "Did they do this to you?"

"I'm afraid so," said a voice from behind. They both turned to see two men in suits, one balding with a friendly-looking face, the other less friendly-looking with a plume of ginger-brown hair behind a receding hairline.

"What have you done here?" Skully asked, rising to her feet after cutting the twine on Mulder's legs. She reached into her blouse and produced her badge. "You've openly attacked an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. That's a class A felo-"

"Put it away, lady. You're out-badged here," the less friendly man interrupted.

The friendlier one cut in as Mulder regained his feet. "We're sorry about the treatment, Agent Mulder, Agent Skully, but this case is no longer in your jurisdiction. We appreciate all your legwork."

Another series of frantic splashes and screams filled the air for a moment. Several of the men could be heard yelling "I got it!" and "Into the crate!" Nothing could be seen through the thick fog.

Mulder spoke. "You used me as bait to capture it. Why?"

The two g-men looked at each other for a moment, then the unfriendly one said "That's classified. But believe me when I say we're all better off for it. Come on, Sitterson," he said, speaking to his partner as he walked towards the lake. "I want to see a mer-man before I die."

"Hold on, Hadley," said Sitterson, bending down and picking up the conch that Skully had dropped. Hadley stopped and turned to Sitterson, who said "We'll need this for the cabin." He tossed the conch to Hadley, who caught it. Grumbling to himself, he carried the conch back towards the woods, away from the action in the water. Sitterson gave the FBI agents a smile and walked towards the fog and the struggling men, rolling up his sleeves as he did so.

Mulder and Skully shared a bewildered look.

"What about Alice?" asked Mulder.

"What?" said Sitterson, turning to face them.

"The little girl who was abducted," he clarified.

"Oh, her!" said Sitterson with a smile. "Eaten probably. Don't worry about it!"

Mulder was about to object, but he was cut off by Sitterson. "Oh, and thank you two again for all the help. Half the things we've collected so far are creatures you two dug up for us. Keep up the good work!"

He gave them both a thumbs up, then disappeared into the fog.

THE END.