

The X Files

Zeitgeist
by Adam Webb

Mulder walked down the white marble steps leading from the offices of DBC-TV, a frown of puzzlement creasing his brow. The case was beginning to look like so many others that he'd read about, and one or two of which he had personal experience. Despite the evidence they'd gathered Scully wasn't entirely convinced — when was she ever — but couldn't escape the fact that a man was missing under decidedly suspicious circumstances. Whether it was truly an X-File case remained to be seen, but his gut feeling was that they were onto something, and that something involved the modern incarnation of an urban legend.

Seven days ago, a freelance reporter by the name of Nelson Longford had failed to return after keeping a late night appointment with someone who'd claimed to be Major James Starlin of the USAF. According to Melissa, the reporter's distraught wife, Starlin had called at the house on one previous occasion. Her husband routinely met a lot of people, but she remembered Starlin because he'd been dressed from head to toe in black. Not the dark blue uniform she'd expected a serving officer to be wearing. On the night of her husband's disappearance, Melissa Longford recalled him taking a phone call at approximately one a.m., and talking about a possible exchange of information concerning whatever it was that had been appearing in the night sky over Dayton, Ohio. Starlin had claimed to have little time, and so Longford had left the house in a hurry, taking his evidence with him.

All that was left behind concerning the "Dayton Disk" were photocopies of a computer printout and one 8" X 10" blow-up of a photograph taken by a competent local witness. The photocopies and impressive print were now in Scully's attach case, the latter awaiting photogrammetrical analysis, the discernment of shape-from-shading. The printout was of data purportedly hacked from the mainframe at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. The complex information it contained included reference to what was possibly an experimental aircraft.

Since the night of his disappearance there'd been no trace of Longford. It was as if he'd vanished off the face of the earth. Questions to Colonel Trendell, at Wright-Patterson AFB, the main USAF facility in Dayton, had resulted in a point blank denial of involvement. The Colonel had refused to confirm or deny the presence of a Major called Starlin, and had rejected outright the accusation that anyone under his jurisdiction had met or spoken with Longford on the date in question. Mulder didn't believe him, but at the same time, he thought it unlikely that the Air Force were directly responsible for the reporter's abduction. Something else was going on, and not for the first time, the USAF knew what it was.

The next stop had been DBC-TV, which had commissioned Longford to make a series of five minute news articles called *In The Air Tonight*, for broadcast in the current affairs show *Dayton After Dark*. Mulder's FBI badge had enabled him to bypass the ranks of secretaries and get straight to Rudy Schwire, the Senior News Editor at DBC.

Schwire had turned out to be an abrasive individual, and had made it abundantly clear that he had no wish to help the Feds. Waving a cigar which looked as if it belonged in the mouth of a much more important man, he'd gone on to say that he had no ideas as to Nelson Longford's whereabouts, and whatever information the reporter had uncovered was not the Bureau's business. Mulder had attempted to reason with him, suggesting that although not legally bound to reveal findings which, at least on the face of it, had no bearing on the case, he was morally obliged to help.

Schwire had laughed at that, and commented that whatever shady company Longford chose to keep was his own affair. Especially if it got him into trouble. But, when asked if the shady company he referred to was a man of possibly Asian descent, a man dressed in black, the editor's mood had abruptly altered. After that he'd claimed to be too busy to answer anymore questions. Mulder had seized the opportunity to put him under pressure, threatening to have him charged with wilfully obstructing an official investigation, unless he cooperated. Schwire had almost broken then. Almost, but not quite. In the end he'd stuck to his guns, grudgingly offering to make private enquiries about Longford's sources, and report back if he managed to discover anything.

"They got to him," Mulder muttered as he slid into the passenger seat of the red Ford parked outside the DBC-TV offices.

"What was that?" Scully asked, glancing briefly across the seats. Signalling, she pulled out into the stream of traffic late afternoon traffic. It was fall, and already the light was starting to fade.

"I said they got to him," Mulder smirked knowingly. Half-turning, he continued enthusiastically. "It's the MIB, Scully. Men In Black. A mysterious group, usually three men, known for terrorizing those who've had a close encounter. Schwire may have been paid a visit."

"Maybe he just doesn't trust anyone who represents a government agency. Lots of people don't like authority, Mulder," the flame-haired agent countered. "That's not proof they've fallen victim to the supernatural."

Fox shook his head slowly. "No. It's more than that. Schwire claimed that Longford was keeping shady company, and when I gave him a description of the typical MIB profile, he looked as if ..." He stopped himself short, unwilling to complete the cliched sentence.

"As if he'd seen a ghost," Scully finished for him, taking momentary pleasure in her partner's scowl of discomfort. Turning right, toward the hotel they were booked into, she said, "It's not enough. We have no solid evidence to connect Schwire — or for that matter anyone else — to Longford's disappearance. Until we do, he doesn't have to give us the time of day if he doesn't want to."

"I know," Mulder sighed. He opened his mouth to speak again, then snapped it shut. Something in the rear-view mirror had caught his attention. "Don't look now," he said wryly. "But we're being tailed."

Scully's eyes immediately flicked to the mirror. Careful to give no sign by her driving that she was aware of possible pursuit, she studied the road behind. Signalling, she took a leisurely right hand turn. "The black Cadillac," she said after a few moments' scrutiny, "three cars back, in the left-hand lane."

"That's the one," Mulder said, finding himself unable to suppress a Cheshire cat grin.

"I don't believe this," Scully's eyes twinkled with mirth. "This is like one of your fantasies."

"And what would you know about my fantasies, Dr Scully," Mulder cocked a Spock-like eyebrow. "We could start with the reoccurring one about WIBS; that's Women In Black Stockings."

"Okay," Scully cut him off. "I get the picture. Let's see how much your friends really want to follow us." Reaching down with her right hand, Scully prepared to change gears.

"Whoa," Mulder gently pushed his partner's hand away from the stick. "Not yet. First, I want to check out who's behind those smoked windows." Voice taking on a serious tone he added,

"Unless they've changed their modus operandi, that isn't the real MIB back there. Let me off at the next junction. We'll see how far they want to take this."

Scully nodded agreement. "I'll double back and come up behind them."

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he Ford had only been out of sight for a few seconds when the long black car accelerated, slowing to walking pace as it drew level with the agent. Mulder glanced casually toward the driver's window as a slight hum announced that its electric motor was winding it down.

"Excuse me. Special Agent Mulder," an authoritative voice said, tone low and very confident. "We'd appreciate a few moments of your time, sir."

"Who might we be?" Mulder asked. Peering into the Cadillac's interior he saw two other individuals, both dressed identically to the one behind the wheel. As expected, all three wore plain black suits with black shirts, thin black neckties and impenetrable sunglasses.

"Could we talk inside the vehicle, sir?"

"Not until I know who I'm talking too," Mulder stood his ground, more amused than nervous. Which from the fleeting expression that crossed the driver's face, was not the intended effect.

"Very well," said a voice from the back of the car. "I'm Major James Starlin. My colleagues and I are part of a special investigation unit, currently attached to the USAF." Before there could be any challenge, he added, "I understand you've been asking questions about me, and I have reason to believe that you're becoming involved with a matter of national security." Now his tone became carefully neutral, "We'd like to appraise you of a few facts. In private, if you have no objections?" Leaning to one side he opened the Cadillac's nearside rear door.

"United States Air Force?" Mulder questioned. "Unless there's been a revolution, those aren't Air Force uniforms." He nodded at the car, "And your vehicle isn't official issue."

Emerging into the lemon light of evening, Starlin removed his sunglasses and stood in front of the FBI man. "As I've already advised you, sir, we're a special unit." Hand dipping quickly into an inside pocket he smiled briefly, noticing that his sudden motion caused Mulder to stiffen, and produced a laminated card. This he held up for examination, waiting patiently until the agent was done.

Scrutinizing the details, Mulder compared the tiny photo with the man who stood before him. Both were in their late thirties, and had short, swept-back dark hair. Starlin and his image were clean-shaven, with angular features and a slightly olive skin tone. The shape of the Major's eyes also betrayed Asian blood, somewhere way back down the line. In all respects the card's printed details exactly matched what had been said, and if forged was of a sufficiently high standard to fool all but the most stringent analysis.

"It seems we have some crossed wires, here," Mulder manufactured a smile. Surreptitiously he glanced around to see if Scully was anywhere in sight. Unfortunately, she wasn't. Nobody on the street seemed aware that anything might be wrong. The good folk of Dayton were going about their business completely oblivious to what might be an abduction in progress.

Catching the glances, Starlin said, "If you're looking for your partner, don't bother. There's no need to be concerned, she's not in any danger." He gestured, dismissing Mulder's look of anxiety. "Let's just say that Agent Scully has got a problem with a malfunction."

Mulder considered his options, knowing that a fast decision was required. If the three truly were a modern-day incarnation of the MIB, perverse as that seemed, they'd track him down before he'd

gone very far. Besides which, if he played the part they were attempting to cast him in, he might be able to learn more about who was really giving the orders. Handing the card back to the man who called himself Major Starlin, he decided to go with the flow. He was still armed, and the men didn't seem inclined toward relieving him of his weapon. Stepping into the waiting Cadillac he couldn't help wondering if Nelson Longford had been the last man to accept an invitation.

Starlin, who really was a Major, slid in next to the man he'd taken into protective custody and nodded to his front seat colleagues. On that signal the engine purred into life and within seconds they were weaving their way through the midtown traffic, once again anonymous behind black glass.

It was a calculated risk he was taking, Mulder thought to himself. Dusk was not far away. The men had him alone, and could pull any number of stunts, but the chances were against anything occurring that would be detrimental to his health. If only a small percentage of what he remembered about the plethora of MIB cases in UFO-lore was true, then whatever pressure they tried to apply would not take the form of physical abuse. But this time they wouldn't get away with their head games. Nobody should be unaccountable.

Starlin took a micro-cassette recorder from his inside breast pocket and clicked it into record mode.

"Let's speak plainly." His tone was crisp, but not hostile. "We are aware of your official interest in the Longford case. As you know, Longford recently made unsubstantiated claims concerning unidentified aircraft in the skies above Dayton. I understand that Mr. Longford's wife has also claimed that her husband met with me on the night of his disappearance." For a fleeting moment the major's tone seemed tinged with regret, then the inflection was gone and it was back to business. "It's my job to inform you that none of these claims are true, and that further investigation into the matter is not required."

"On whose authority do you speak?" Mulder asked.

"Failure to comply with my request may result in the loss of your badge, Agent Mulder." Face and voice became a reflection of official policy the Major recited from memory, "Under section 23, subsection 17 of the Pentagon's ruling on matters of national security, interference with matters of ..."

"I'm not buying this, Major," Mulder interrupted. Sitting up straight he poked a finger at his questioner. "If the military are stupid enough to test-fly a new type of aircraft close to a large town, then they can't complain if the locals get interested. I can see how there may be a case for confiscating evidence. But what possible reason is there for imprisonment without trial? That is what's happened to Nelson Longford, isn't it, Major? America may be screwed up, but last time I checked it was still the land of the free."

"Freedom, Agent Mulder, is a double-edged sword," Starlin replied quickly, voice turned icy-cold. "Those who abuse it sometimes find themselves in too deep. So deep, they drown."

"Is that some kind of threat?" Mulder met the major's stare head on, refusing to be intimidated. "Maybe we should take this up with your Commanding Officer. Who did you say he was?"

"I didn't." Starlin's gaze didn't waver for an instant. "What I will tell you, is that the United States Air Force has nothing to do with Longford's disappearance, and is not engaged in testing any experimental aircraft over Dayton. Do I make myself clear?"

For a moment Mulder said nothing, understanding that Starlin might just have made a veiled admission. "So we're talking genuine unidentifieds." Unable to keep the edge of excitement from his voice he used a military codeword. "Angels. You're talking about Angels."

"Drop the case, Mulder," The Major ordered tersely.

"A little over a week ago, something big, silent and silver was prescribing what can only be described as aerodynamically impossible manoeuvres in the sky between Dayton and Richmond," Mulder responded, now veering toward the belief that the man seated beside him was a member of some covert department, masquerading as MIB for reasons unknown.

"Simple misidentification," Starlin said, sounding as if he'd made the speech a thousand times before. Which may have been true. "Like the Loch Ness Monster, or Bigfoot. People see what they want to see. Most of the time it's no more real than Casper."

"How about men in black who terrorize and kidnap U.S. citizens?" Mulder responded acidly. "Looking at you, Major, I'd say that phenomenon has some basis in reality."

"There are reasons," the major stated flatly, refusing to meet the agent's accusing eyes.

"How about giving me some of those reasons, Major?" Mulder asked. "If you aren't holding Nelson Longford, who is?" When no reply was forthcoming, the agent shrugged. "Okay, then I guess we'll have to keep looking. Sooner or later, we'll make a connection."

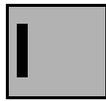
"Christ! I could do without this," Starlin sighed deeply. Voice pitched almost too low to be heard he said, "I'm probably gonna regret telling you this, Mulder. But you're wasting your time, and mine." Suddenly seeming a lot older, he turned to face the agent. "You can't find what isn't there. Nelson Longford isn't anywhere that you, or I, could reach."

After fifteen minutes of driving around in circles, Dana Scully concluded that her partner had indeed been snatched, while a set of lights stuck on red had held her up for vital minutes. At least she was attributing the problem to mundane electrical failure. Any other explanation and she'd be straying into Mulder's territory. The fact that he'd deliberately placed himself in jeopardy now seemed farcical. Inwardly she was reprimanding herself for having gone along with his wishes. What Mulder had done certainly wasn't by the book, and if she couldn't get him back then they could both kiss goodbye to their careers. But that wasn't going to happen. Forcing herself to remain calm and think logically, she started back toward the hotel. When Mulder was able to make contact, that was where he'd expect her to be.

Just a couple of blocks away from the building, she changed her mind. If Mulder's abductors were for real, then they might be watching the hotel, waiting for her to return. There was no point in stepping into a potential trap until she was sure of how she was going to deal with it. Heading east for a few miles, she turned onto the forecourt of the first motel she could find, and booked in under a false name. The ID was one of three she had available for just such emergency situations.

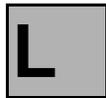
Parking the car around the back of a cabin, where it couldn't be seen from the road, locked the door behind her and sat down to think things out.

Mulder was unconventional, to say the least, but he wasn't stupid. He'd thought that the men in the black Cadillac were impostors, and that's probably all they were. Therefore, he was unlikely to be in any real danger. Taking him would have been an act of bravado. Unless, that was, he'd gone voluntarily for some reason or other. Mulder had a habit of doing things like that, and it occasionally drove her crazy. Several times during the first few cases on which they'd been paired she'd considered requesting reassignment, but every time she'd decided to give him another chance. Mainly because, underneath the boyish good looks and spooky behavior, there was something about Fox Mulder that she had seen only rarely in human beings. He was genuinely dedicated to pursuit of truth, no matter where the chase might lead or how dirty it became.



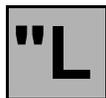
In the front of the black Cadillac, Lieutenants Warby and Draeger ignored the at times heated conversation taking place behind them. They'd both heard its like on many previous occasions, and knew the most likely outcome. Not even the FBI had the authority to interfere with Operation Zeitgeist, the most highly classified secret in the history of the United States.

Warby, presently the man at the wheel, drove onward heading for an expanse of open land between the communities of Piqua and Springfield. A wide open tract, rented by the USAF. Behind the impassive mask of his face he was smiling. Night was falling fast, and before the breaking of another dawn his double-life among the Betas would be at an end. Everything was going according to plan, and Starlin, the last acquisition of his mission, did not have the slightest suspicion that one of those he chased was only feet away.



Lieutenant Al Draeger was in a more pensive frame of mind than the man he thought of as a colleague. Two years past he'd volunteered for Zeitgeist, thinking it would be a good career move. It had been entirely his own decision, so he had no one else to blame for his state of unease, but some days the realities of the job gave him the creeps. Zeitgeist ground men had the task of locating witnesses to authentic UFO incidents and convincing them that keeping quiet was in their own best interest. Which, in many ways, was the truth. Whenever possible, any potentially verifiable evidence was confiscated, thus reducing the unfortunate citizen's chances of an encounter with those who would take much more than evidence.

Using the same black "uniform" as true MIB was a ploy left over from the beginnings of the Operation, when it had been adopted with the intention of spreading confusion. Legend said that the planners had also hoped to encourage mistaken encounters with real Men In Black, the self-styled Alphas. While indisputably successful in their primary aim, the secondary intention had never worked. Real MIB could tell, instantly, when they were in the presence of their own kind. They knew, without the need for words or identification cards. Of the very few face-to-face encounters between the two groups, only four had been concluded successfully for the impostors. Four, in what was fast approaching twenty-five years of covert war.



Let's take a walk," Starlin said as the Cadillac rolled to a halt. Reaching for the door catch he flashed a brief, reassuring smile to the FBI man. "Relax, Mulder. Whatever you may think, we're on the same side."

Mulder followed the black-suited Major as he set off up the side of a steep, grassy hillside. It was full night, but the light of a three-quarter moon illuminated the countryside well enough to see. Looking around from the top he was slightly disturbed to find that there were no buildings in sight. Starlin hadn't spoken for more than half an hour, and his silence was fuel enough for the seeds of unpleasant imaginings to begin growing. Over the years, several writers, researchers and scientists who'd become involved with the UFO phenomenon had either vanished, or died under mysterious circumstances.

"The reason I brought you here," Starlin swept a hand through the air in an all-encompassing gesture, "is because this area is clean. No bugs, nowhere to hide, and no chance of accidental disturbance."

"An ideal killing ground, maybe?" Mulder said, preparing to reach for his holstered pistol.

"I'm no hitman," Starlin almost laughed. Moving with deliberate slowness he unbuttoned his jacket and held it open for inspection. "See, I don't even have a water-pistol." Letting the jacket's flaps fall together he ambled closer to the agent. "Believe it or not, termination is a last resort. Unnecessary in the majority of cases. Only fools have to die, Mulder, and you're no fool. I don't expect you to agree with our methods, but you will understand when I say that there are certain facts that the American people cannot be told. Facts which, in all honesty, they are not ready to hear."

"Alien technology?" Mulder asked. Swallowing hard, he wondered if he was about to hear another off-the-record confession from another undercover operative who knew that Earth was being visited.

"No, that's not what I meant."

Mulder frowned. "If the 'Dayton Disk' is not extraterrestrial, and not ours, what is it? A foreign aircraft?"

"That is a matter of national security." Starlin folded his arms across his chest and stared at the agent. "Longford got too close, and now he's out of reach. That's all you need to know."

"It isn't enough."

"Back off," the Major enunciated very clearly. "That's the best advice you'll ever get."

"Supposing I don't want to take it?"

Starlin sighed audibly, and half turning away, said, "Then you will be noticed, Agent Mulder." He held up a warning finger. "Believe me, you wouldn't want that to happen."

"Noticed by whom?"

"Those I represent," Starlin said, quickly adding, "If you're lucky. They can turn your life upside down. Think no job, zero credit rating. Think stories planted to screw your remaining credibility. By the time they're done, nobody this side of Donald Duck would take you seriously."

"Must be a big, dirty secret, you're guarding," Mulder smoldered. "I have friends, Major. Busting me is one thing. Agent Scully is another. If I take a fall for doing my job, she would feel obliged to find out who was responsible, and why they acted in such an overtly criminal manner. You'd have to wreck her life too. Or maybe you could save time and do us both together. Then more people would begin asking questions. So they'd have to be dealt with. Pretty soon you'd have to silence the whole of the FBI. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, Major, but I don't think you or your bosses have that kind of power."

"You're a real pain in the ass, Mulder. You know that?" Starlin looked away, taking a few moments to think.

"I've seen copies of official documentation referring to an aircraft code-named Zeitgeist 516," Mulder played his ace. "There's radar confirmation of its speed, the distance covered, estimated size of the craft, etc. I'd be willing to bet that no U.S. or foreign aircraft matches those specifications."

"It isn't what you think," Starlin insisted. "This isn't like anything you've encountered before."

"No? Then tell me who snatched Longford. I don't understand." Running a hand through his hair, Mulder added, "If you guys are on the level, why wear the funeral suits? This isn't just about invasion of U.S. air space. There's too much here that doesn't make sense, Major."

For a long moment the Major said nothing. Then, turning to face the agent, he spoke with the conviction of a man who knows that what he's saying is the inviolable truth.

"I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this, Mulder. Because when I'm through you'll wish you didn't have the answers. Knowledge means responsibility, whether you want it or not. Like the President, you'll keep your nose out and your mouth shut! You'll think about what you've been told every

damn day and night, until your head hurts. But you won't be able to speak about it to anyone. That's the deal. The lid must stay on this thing. Accept it, or you'll leave those who make policy no choice. Believe me, if it's deemed necessary, they will take you and your partner out, no matter how bad the stink gets."

Mulder's mind reeled. There were so many unanswered questions, so much that he needed to know. If, as was seeming increasingly likely, Starlin and his crew were covert operatives, then what had been said was not a bluff. He didn't like agreeing to the concealment of truth, but was smart enough to know that sometimes, that was the way it had to be. Finally, the desire to learn the truth was what made his choice. He'd deal with his conscience later.

"Okay," Mulder nodded, feeling like Adam in the Garden of Eden.

"You've stumbled over the tip of an iceberg," Starlin said enigmatically. "An iceberg in the sky. You see, Agent Mulder, my boys and I aren't the only Men In Black."

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aking advantage of Major Starlin's absence, Lieutenant Draeger had returned the car's radio to the frequency of WROK FM, the local soft rock station, and was tapping out the beat of a tune against the dashboard. By perverse coincidence the song being played was *Take Me Away*, the Blue Oyster Cult's naive plea to the pilots of supposedly extraterrestrial craft.

It was a song that Lieutenant Warby knew quite well. He'd heard it on several previous occasions, when Draeger had dialled up WROK. One line in particular always made him smile openly. It was when Eric Bloom sang — "The men in black, their lips are sealed." His amusement was for the simple reason that he knew how very true the lyric was.

There had been much progress, since the beginning. Under Zeitman's guidance they'd taken what they needed with little challenge. No significant government was willing to publicly admit the existence of a hidden, virtual nation, whose technology was far in advance of anything Western science had produced. Therefore the vast majority of planet Earth's citizens remained blissfully unaware. The few that did uncover the truth were either taken and turned, or left to be discredited and ridiculed by their own governments. Back when it had all begun, the world's great military powers would've used their atomic weapons, if only they'd known precisely where to hit. But by the time they'd known it was Brazil, they'd also been aware of how high the cost of a nuclear "accident" in that area would have been. Since then, they'd also been frequently reminded by humiliating displays of aerial superiority that the saucers could, and would if necessary, be used directly against the Houses of Parliament, the Kremlin or the White House.

Over the years the original group of less than two hundred Alphas had expanded almost a hundred fold. Those abducted to form slave labor groups had carved out an entire city, most of which was under the inaccessible heart of the Brazilian rain forest. Worldwide, the number of Alpha humans was now in excess of two-hundred-thousand.

Warby stole a sideways glance at his wristwatch. It was nearly time. His walk among the dark side of humanity was almost at an end. Turning to face the man who sat next to him, he knew that he would not miss him. Like all with his mindset, he saw nothing wrong with the systematic rape and plunder which his kind had inflicted upon the planet from the moment they'd gained ascendance.

"Goodnight," Warby said quietly.

"Huh?" Draeger cocked his head to one side. "What was that?" The answer was a lightning swift movement of Warby's right hand, inside which was concealed a small hypodermic needle. Plunging it into the side of Draeger's neck, he emptied its contents.

"We've waited a long time for an opportunity like this," Warby explained to the drugged man. Casually brushing aside grasping hands, he continued, "We'd take you and turn you if we could, Draeger. But we can't, you've already been through the process."

Face turning pale and speech slurring, Draeger clung to consciousness. Mouth emitting a horrible dry sucking noise, he lurched toward the Alpha, clawed fingers seeking eyes. But the required energy was no longer his to command. Eyelids flickering shut, he slumped back against the passenger door and became still.

Altering the frequency of the Cadillac's broadcast radio, Warby picked up the dashboard-mounted microphone. "Cloud 5," he said, knowing that there would be no spoken response. "Commence free fall." Head turning to regard the oblivious Major, he added, "Rendezvous at 18:30 hours."

When an hour and a half had passed with no word, Scully decided that the time for waiting was over. Mulder was in trouble, and she had to do something. Flipping open the spring-loaded locks on her tan attache case, she withdrew the plain manila envelope that contained the evidence collected from Melissa Longford. Spreading out the photocopied data and the single picture on the dressing table, she switched on the extension lamp and directed its beam onto the print. The majestic multi-colored disk was center top, with what seemed to be open ground beneath. The tops of some trees were visible in the distance, and at the bottom of the picture, at the extreme right edge, half of a sign was just visible. Mounted on a white-painted stake, it was partially blurred due to the angle at which the photograph had been taken. There was part of an emblem, but not enough to make it recognizable. Scully turned the picture every which way, but couldn't make out anymore detail.

Reaching for her address book, Scully found Melissa Longford's number and dialed. "Hello. Mrs Longford? This is Special Agent Dana Scully. I'm sorry to bother you, but if you could spare me a few more minutes of your time, there's something I'd like to show you. Yes, it is rather urgent. Okay, I'll be with you in approximately ten minutes."

At first the reporter's wife claimed not to know anything about the specific area over which the "Dayton Disk" had been photographed, or about the blurred sign. But Scully knew she was lying on both counts. The lie was evident in every nuance of her body language, and her avoidance of eye to eye contact.

"There may not be much time, Melissa," Scully tried the woman to woman approach. "So if you can tell me anything, anything at all, it has to be now. Agent Mulder disappeared while trying to discover the truth about what happened to your husband." Scully held the photograph before Melissa Longford's eyes, forcing her to look again. "I think they may both be somewhere in this area. Now, can you tell me where it is?"

Melissa bit down on her lower lip, caught between the desire to help and loyalty to her husband. Nelson had told her that the precise location of the sightings was to stay secret. Nobody, especially not anyone official, was to be told unless he gave the okay. The problem was, Nelson wasn't around to make that decision. And if she refused to help, he might never be around.

"It's about two miles east of the town." Melissa confided, again finding herself on the verge of tears. "That signpost," she touched the photograph, "is one of a dozen, planted all along the perimeter."

Closing the car door, Scully buckled up and drove away from the Longford home. The sign, warning trespassers to keep out, was one of several marking the perimeter of land rented — but not actively used — by the USAF. Assuming that the same people had taken both Nelson Longford and Mulder, it was possible, even likely, that they were hidden somewhere on the site.

Thumb dialling numbers on her mobile phone as she drove, Scully left an urgent message for Colonel Trendell at Wright-Patterson AFB, and checking that no one was following, headed out of town. What she'd set into motion wasn't, strictly speaking, proper procedure. But then, neither was what she and Mulder had become involved with. Giving Colonel Trendell the benefit of the doubt, she'd placed him in a position where he virtually had to take action. And by so doing, create a situation for which he would be accountable.



he craft seen over Dayton was manufactured right here on Earth." Starlin asserted. "It's one of the Cloud series, which were based on designs for something called the *Kugelblitz*, or ball lightning fighter. Plans captured from Nazi Germany at the end of Word War Two."

"Captured by the U.S.?" Mulder asked.

"Partly. The technology under development was spread out between several widely scattered projects. Roughly two-thirds of what was left intact ended up in U.S. hands. The rest went to the British and the Soviets. All three nations put their top people to work on perfecting what the Nazis had started, with varying degrees of success. We came closest, Mulder," the Major said with just a hint of pride. "Before Gilbert Zeitman, our chief avionics designer, went missing."

"Zeitman Zeitgeist," the agent thought aloud.

"Right," Starlin nodded. "It's German for time ghost, which is a cryptic description of what we're facing. Anyway, the official line on Zeitman was that he died in an auto accident. Hell, there's even supposed to be a matching body in his coffin." The major offered an insincere smile. "It was the biggest snow-job since Chappaquiddick."

"And Zeitgeist 516?" Mulder prompted.

"One of Gilbert's Zeitman's newest models," the Major supplied. Pausing to reflect for a moment, he continued, "The guys who got Longford, the other men in black, are the same people who fly Zeitman-designed saucers."

"Who are they?"

"The first were American. But now they come from all parts of the world. It started in 1963, with a consultant neurologist attached to NASA. He found a way to enable selected individuals to perform mental tasks up to seventy percent more efficiently."

"Seventy!" Mulder let out a hiss of astonishment. "What was it, some kind of mind expanding drug?"

"You're thinking astronauts on acid, right?" Starlin smiled, this time in genuine amusement. "No, it was nothing chemical. What he discovered was that pulsed light, of a particular intensity and alternating wavelength, could be used to trigger a massive reaction within the human brain." He paused, searching for an appropriate analogy. "I suppose you could describe it as being like an epileptic seizure in reverse. Instead of shutting down, the brains of some test subjects seemed to open up, radically increasing their short-term memory and speed of thought. And if that sounds like the dawning of a new age, that's because it was. Only not quite the way we figured. The main problem was that the length of time to which an individual remained super-efficient was unpredictable." Starlin massaged the bridge of his nose with forefinger and thumb. "By using boosted scientists to work on the problem, it was solved in under a year. Or so it was thought. Those treated with the refined light process had a few hours or days up at seventy percent, then dropped down by around ten percent, with no subsequent deterioration." The Major flashed a humorless smile. "Still sounds good, huh?"

Trying to make the connections for himself, Mulder nodded. "So how widespread was this?"

"By the late '60s, roughly one-fifth of all NASA personnel, and a handful of high rollers in the military and political machines, had been treated. There seemed to be entirely beneficial effects; quicker reactions, near photographic memory, vastly increased learning capacity." Starlin held up a finger. "Don't get it wrong, Mulder, the process did not turn a smart guy into a genius. It just made him a lot better at what he could already do."

"But it was tried on a genius, wasn't it, Major?" Mulder asked, feeling as if an icicle had slipped into his mind.

"Gilbert Zeitman," Starlin nodded, then looked idly to the dark sky. "What we didn't know a goddamned thing about, at the time, was what came to be known as the Zeitgeist effect." He tapped his forehead with an extended index finger. "Some say that what happens is a sort of schizophrenia, an alternate personality dormant in all people. The other main school of thought is that we're dealing with a separate, symbiotic life form. Something which has always been a part of mankind. Whatever, the fact is that all of those who were subjected to the refined process eventually suffered a total change of psychological profile."

"Can it be reversed?" the agent asked, horrified.

"Not without turning the subject into a vegetable. The keyboard junkies who go for the symbiote angle came up with the name Zeitgeist, suggesting that whatever took over might be the psychological remnant of Neanderthal man. A literal time-ghost. Only those who turned are about as far removed from Fred Flintstone as the Cray computer is from an abacus! The thing is, Mulder, despite the changes they appeared to be just the same. Even the husbands and wives of those boosted didn't think anything was wrong. Only later was it discovered that the Alphas, as they call themselves, had been working together, planning in secret toward the day that Zeitman was boosted. They stole Zeitman's prototype saucer, with the man and all his work aboard. The craft's own anti-radar technology — early stealth — prevented us from getting an accurate fix on their course."

"When was all this?" Mulder asked, fascinated by what he was hearing, and wishing that Scully was there to hear it too.

"The third of August, 1971. Each year since then the Alphas have grown in strength, and in numbers. They snatch people from all over the globe, sometimes because they've seen something they shouldn't, mostly because they're in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"My God."

"We're fighting back as best we can, but they're geographically-based in a place where military strikes are not a realistic option. All we can do is wait and hope we can catch up in time. We've got people working on the aeronautics, boosted up to seventy percent using the temporary process. But with them, in addition to the time factor, we have the problem that the process only works once on the same individual. There are only so many suitable personnel." Starlin gave a shrug of resignation. "Until we can compete in the air, they've got the drop on us." He paused, as if the statement he was about to make was physically painful. "You see, Mulder, the Alphas claim that this world originally belonged to their kind of human, and they have no intention of sharing it indefinitely."

"That is correct, Major," Lieutenant Warby agreed.

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oot down hard on the accelerator, Scully arrowed in pursuit of the light in the sky. She'd noticed it while approaching the western edge of the restricted zone, and realized at once that what she was seeing was not any kind of conventional aircraft. What she was seeing was the "Dayton Disk."

At first it had appeared as a silvery white blob of light, darting at incredible speed from one part of the sky to another, stopping dead each time it reached new coordinates. Scully had been willing to write it off as some sort of unknown natural phenomenon, until it had begun to descend. Cloaked in a shimmering haze of pale blue, strobe-bright light, the craft was oval-shaped and, she guesstimated, slightly bigger than a 747 airliner. Coming straight down between the clouds, it cast a stark circle of brilliance onto the ground below, illuminating two or possibly three figures. Scully couldn't tell if any of them was Mulder.

Approaching the site from the opposite side, Scully could see the flashing lights of what she knew were military vehicles. The message she'd left for Colonel Trendell had stated that unidentified, possibly hostile intruders were on restricted land. At the time she'd made the call she hadn't known that for certain, but it had seemed like a reasonable bet. Plus it was a way to ensure that if she needed back up, it wouldn't be too far away.

Descending in eerie, absolute silence, the incredible craft had no protuberances, control surfaces or windows that Mulder could make out. But then, it was hard to make out anything against the blinding glare.

"Run, Mulder!" Major Starlin bellowed. "It's me they're after. Take the car and get away, now."

The agent didn't hesitate. There were times for heroics, and this wasn't one of them. Leaving the two black-clad figures circling each other, he darted toward the Cadillac. Hand on the door handle he paused, unable to resist a backward glance at the craft designated Zeitgeist 516. A narrow circle of intense blue-white illuminated Starlin and his ersatz subordinate, causing the Major to stop in his tracks as if frozen in place. The beam emanated from the dark underbelly of the craft, which looked like a miniaturized black hole. Heart thumping against his ribcage, Mulder decided that he'd seen enough. Jerking open the door he dived behind the wheel, knowing that there was no time to concern himself with the condition of the unconscious figure occupying the passenger seat. Not until they were safe. It was then that he discovered the ignition key was missing.

"No!" Mulder struck the steering wheel with the flat of his hand.

Putting the car between himself and the saucer, Mulder drew his pistol and aimed over the roof. He knew that the weapon would probably be about as effective as a peashooter, but it was better than nothing. Or at least it would be, if he could stop shaking for long enough to shoot straight. A hundred yards away, Starlin stood before the other MIB — the *real* MIB — as if paralyzed. With the saucer hovering silently no more than twenty feet above them, the victor turned and held up something for Mulder to see. It took a few seconds for him to realize that he was being shown the missing car keys.

"When we want you, Agent Mulder, we know where to find you," Warby said ominously, allowing the keys to fall glittering to the ground.

Before Mulder could even think to react, the center of the craft seemed to grow darker still, and the blue beam was abruptly discontinued. Replacing it were five pencil-thin rays of green laser light, defining a pentagonal area around the two men. A second later they were lifted clear of the ground, and like passengers on an invisible elevator, rose up into the belly of the saucer. Once they were inside, something slid shut with a barely audible hiss of compressed air. Without warning, the craft shot straight up, fast as a high velocity bullet, and in seconds had climbed thousands of feet into the sky. As it got further away, nearer to the thin layers of atmosphere, its motion seemed to slow, and its color dull. At the last it was indistinguishable from the other stars.

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till shaking a minute or two later when Scully screeched to a halt, Mulder was at first unable to speak. The things he'd been told, the things he'd seen, were not what he'd expected. Starlin had been right. The Zeitman saucers were a matter of national security. He should have known when to back off. Now he had to be very careful what he said, and to whom.

"What was that thing?" Scully asked. Indicating the fast approaching military contingent she added, "Better get your story straight, Mulder. Here comes the cavalry."

"I don't know," Mulder lied, poker-faced. "They dosed me with some kind of hallucinogen." Manufacturing a look of haziness, he added, "I guess it was something I just wasn't meant to see."

"Then we'll have to report it as unidentified," Scully said, her tone a mixture of relief and, strangely, disappointment.

"Right," Mulder forced himself to grin. "Or maybe one of those amazing weather balloons." Turning away from Scully, Mulder readied himself to deal with the inevitable barrage of questions the military would attempt to get answered. Most of them he would be able to deflect, or avoid entirely by feigning drug-induced amnesia. The Air Force might suspect that he was being economical with the truth, but lacked the authority required to hold him long enough to prove it. They would know that, and so were unlikely to bother going through the motions. As for the unconscious individual they'd find slumped inside the Cadillac, Mulder was sure that — whoever the man really was — he'd know better than to talk. So that left Dana Scully. Perhaps it would be a matter of hours, or days, maybe even a week or two, but his partner would eventually be asking more questions. Mulder's eyes flickered briefly in Scully's direction. He wondered if, when the time came, he'd tell her what he knew. Once again she'd been there when he'd needed her, charging to the rescue without a second thought. Scully deserved to know the truth. But then, considering the probable consequences of revealing it, she deserved even more to have that truth kept from her.