

Catharsis by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/catharsis/>
Chapter 1 by Xanthe

Mulder presented his Master with a plate containing his favourite meal, and then sank down on the floor beside the big man, head down, awaiting further instruction. None was forthcoming.

After several minutes, Mulder raised his head slightly and peeked at his Master from under his eyelashes. What he saw made his heart sink. Skinner was staring straight ahead, his dinner completely untouched. His Master's face was gray and haggard, and there were dark shadows under his eyes.

"Master," Mulder said gently.

"Mmm?" Skinner tore his gaze away from a spot on the far wall with some difficulty and glanced down at his slave. "Oh. Yes. I...you know I'm not very hungry, Fox. Why don't you eat this. I have some work to finish up." He got up, and, without another glance at his slave, he went to his den.

Mulder got to his feet with a sigh and sat down in the seat his Master had vacated. He pushed his fork into the food with a disinterested gaze that was just as distracted as his Master's had been a few moments before. He knew what the problem was – he just didn't know what to do about it.

Skinner had been called out to a hostage situation that had been dubbed "the new Waco" three weeks ago. While Skinner had advised caution and negotiation, the Deputy Director had pulled rank and ordered that Skinner send a swat team in.

It had all gone badly wrong from there, with several of Skinner's agents dying in the botched raid, as well as most of the hostages. It had fallen to the Assistant Director to conduct the inevitable clean up operation – and the task of informing 27 relatives about the deaths of their loved ones – including some of his finest agents. On top of that, the Deputy Director had neatly scape-goated his Assistant Director, and Skinner, much to Mulder's frustration, seemed to accept this as no less than his due.

Mulder wondered whether there was anything he could do to jolt his Master out of his guilt trip. He knew Skinner wasn't sleeping well, to say nothing of the fact that his Master had been working day and night in the immediate aftermath of the crisis and was exhausted beyond endurance. Although the furore surrounding the crisis was gradually fading, and their working lives were returning to normal, Skinner clearly couldn't let it go.

Their normal Master/slave routines had fallen by the wayside as Skinner buried himself in his work and showed less and less interest in any of his surroundings – including his slave. Mulder wasn't concerned about himself, although he certainly missed his Master's amorous attention – he was more concerned about the man himself. He loved Skinner fiercely and wholeheartedly, and he felt they had reached a place in their relationship where they were able to talk to each other about what was bothering them. It hadn't been easy getting to that point – their emotional intimacy had been hard won after a huge learning curve – so Mulder was all the more distressed to find that his Master was shutting him out – hell, Skinner was shutting everyone out.

Mulder knew his Master was hurting inside and he longed to be able to comfort and get through to him – he just had to figure out a way how – and soon. Mulder was worried that if this continued much longer, it would end with Skinner needing another hard session with the heavy rubber whip – either at Elaine's hands or at Mulder's and Mulder didn't think he could bear to deliver the harsh whipping his Master required to ease his feelings of guilt – not on this issue anyway. There was no way Skinner should be taking this much responsibility for what had happened – and Mulder wanted to head off the impending crisis before it resulted in any further harm befalling his Master – physical or mental.

As Skinner's slave, Mulder viewed himself as the guardian of his Master's every comfort – and that included emotional comfort as well as more physical creature comforts. He wasn't about to let his Master down in his hour of need. Skinner had been there for him during his many crises and he wanted to show his Master that it was a two way street - and that he could give back to this relationship as much as he took out.

With a determined nod, Mulder got up, and ran up the stairs. He opened the door the Playroom – technically forbidden, but Mulder knew where Skinner kept the spare key and he thought that now would be a good time to use it. He opened one of the cupboards, and searched through it until he found what he was looking for: a beautiful golden harness and a matching pair of harem pants in turquoise with gold stripes down the side.

Usually only a direct order from his Master would have compelled Mulder to willingly don this exotic garb, but that was the whole point – he figured that Skinner needed something this seductive to break his current mood and actually make him notice his slave and if Skinner noticed him then there was also a chance that he might start talking to him.

Mulder got dressed in the harem boy outfit and then added some kohl to line his eyes. He made a face at himself in the mirror – frankly, he thought he looked ridiculous but he knew his Master loved it when he dressed up like this. Skinner hadn't touched him since the crisis, not even to deliver his usual daily spankings, and for a man who was usually so sensual, that seemed deeply wrong to Mulder. Perhaps if he could entice his Master into sex, then in the quiet intimacy following the event, he would be able to talk to Skinner about why this was hitting him so hard and how he could put it behind him and move on.

Mulder went back down the stairs, and paused for a moment outside the den. He took a deep breath, knocked on the door, and then entered without waiting for his Master to summon him. Skinner was sitting at his desk but he wasn't working – he was just staring into space.

"Master," Mulder said softly. Skinner's eyes flickered over him, not even registering how he was dressed.

"Fox – did you want something?" Skinner asked politely.

"I was wondering when you were coming to bed, Master," Mulder said, suddenly feeling very stupid standing there dressed as he was, when Skinner clearly neither noticed nor cared.

"Later. I..." Skinner's eyes suddenly alighted on the costume and he gave a twisted, regretful sigh. "I'm sorry, Fox," he murmured. "Why don't you go to bed? I'll be here for quite some time."

And with that, he bent his head, picked up his pen and began to work – or pretended to. There wasn't much that Mulder's sharp eyes missed, and he knew when he was being fobbed off with an excuse. Skinner didn't have to work – he just wanted to be alone so he could beat himself up some more about what had happened.

"Walter, we need to talk about this," Mulder said firmly, not for the first time either – he had been trying to get to the heart of Skinner's problem for days.

"Not now, Mulder," Skinner told him. Mulder wasn't even sure if his Master knew he had called his slave by his work name and not his slave name – and that really made him concerned. He could see there was no use in pressing the matter further, so he withdrew, with a despondent sigh, aware that he had a real problem on his hands: How on earth did a slave deal with his Master who wasn't being...well, very masterful?

Maybe that was the crux of the problem, Mulder thought to himself as he returned to the Playroom to undress. Skinner was questioning his own judgement – the hostage crisis had been a professional disaster for him and his confidence in his own skill as a boss – or authority figure of any kind – had taken a battering. No wonder he didn't want to exert his authority at home as a result.

Mulder spent a restless night worrying about the problem. Skinner came to bed late – at nearly 3 am, and when Mulder turned in the bed and tried to put his arms around his Master, Skinner gently but firmly pushed him away.

Mulder was no nearer to a solution to the problem when he woke the following day. He performed his wake up call as usual, but although Skinner usually responded to his ministrations, on this occasion, for the first time ever, his cock remained resolutely flaccid. Mulder worked it with his tongue and mouth for several long minutes until finally, his Master reached down and pushed him away again, muttering something about being too tired. Mulder was distraught – he loved his Master and wanted to help him in any way he could. He had failed in any kind of a sexual way, so it was clear he would have to put his slave hat to one side and wear his psychologist's hat instead.

He lay, naked, on the bed, pondering the problem, while Skinner got up and took a shower. Wanda stretched out, warm and utterly at peace with the world as usual, her dainty paws patting idly at Mulder's fingers. She smiled and flicked her ear, and she grabbed his hand with her paws.

"Ouch! You've got your claws out, madam!" He complained. She gazed at him with darkening irises, clearly spoiling for a fight. "Ah, so that's how it is, is it?" Mulder said, grinning at her. He moved his hand in a circular motion around her ears and her entire head moved round and round, following the direction of his hand, her eyes excited and full of mischief. Every so often she would pounce up and try to catch his fingers and every time he would move them out of the way just in time – until she was too fast for him and grabbed his hand with her claws, drew it to her mouth, and delivered a firm bite.

"OW!" He yelped. "You are a bad cat, Wanda Skinner." She lolled against him, clearly delighted by his reaction and tried to grab his hand again. "Uh-uh – once bitten, twice shy," he told her. "Literally in this case!" He gently tickled her tummy and she went from being a fiercely stalking tiger to a bundle of purring mush in a fraction of a second.

"Hmmm," Mulder considered as he examined his slightly bitten hand. It wasn't a serious bite but he could see the indentations of her teeth. "You know, I think you enjoyed that," he said to her. Her sparkling eyes made it quite clear that she had. "Which gives me an idea..." Mulder murmured. His Master wasn't the top for nothing after all – there was nothing preordained that said Mulder would be the slave and Skinner the Master. They assumed those roles because they **enjoyed** them, because it suited them and turned them on, and because they naturally complemented each other whilst in those roles. So, it stood to reason that Skinner had to enjoy being a Master and all the things that went with it, as much as Mulder enjoyed being a slave...

"Easy," Mulder said, getting up. "All you have to do is find a way to provoke him into being a Master again – then we can deal with the rest of the issues from there. Simple." He grinned ruefully at himself in his reflection in the mirror on the dresser. He knew that the task ahead of him would be anything but simple.

His first act of trying to provoke Skinner into being a Master once more was to neglect to wear his cock and nipple rings. These were the only rings that he actually dared take off. The wedding ring meant too much to him – he wouldn't take that off again even if it meant saving his own life. As far as he was concerned, only Skinner had the right to remove it, and he sincerely doubted that his Master would ever do so. The collar meant only slightly less to him – he couldn't bear the thought of removing it – it was at the very heart of his identity as a slave.

So...the nipple rings and cock rings were the next best things. He dispensed with them immediately, placing them in his underwear drawer. It was strange but as soon as he removed them he felt instantly naked and bereft. He had to remind himself that he was doing this for his Master, and fight the urge to put the rings back on again.

Skinner returned from the shower a few seconds later, and Mulder waited, expectantly, wondering how long it would take his Master to notice his act of flagrant rebellion and flinching slightly inside from the knowledge that Skinner would be both hurt and angry at his disobedience – but at least that was a starting point for a conversation.

Skinner was as distant as ever. He rebuffed Mulder's attempt to help him dress and instead curtly ordered his slave to see to his own state of dress if he didn't want to be late for work. Mulder stood around, naked, for several minutes, hoping Skinner would notice the absence of the rings, but to no avail. His Master simply dressed and then left the room with a hastily muttered farewell.

With a sigh, Mulder realised this called for far more desperate measures than this one act of mild rebellion – it required an entire campaign of mutiny.

He started his campaign that day, by "forgetting" to collect Skinner's shirts from the cleaners and not buying any groceries. No reaction. The next day he decided to drop in on the Lone Gunmen after work and play computer games – without telling his Master.

When he returned home, Skinner was in his den as usual. He glanced up, a slightly pained look in his eye when Mulder put his head around the door to say "hey", but apart from that there was no other reaction. Mulder sighed and gritted his teeth – how much more would it take? The Master he knew and loved would have thrown his slave over his knee long before this, and punished his ass soundly for his impertinence, but Skinner just didn't seem to care.

Mulder retired to bed to dream up his next strategy for provoking his Master into some kind of a discussion. Over the next few days he escalated his campaign. While Skinner wasn't being a Master, he decided he wouldn't be a slave – and maybe at some point the big man would wake up to the fact that they had a problem that needed to be talked about. There were now no groceries in the house – and no clean shirts for his Master either, although Mulder made sure he collected his own shirts from the laundry. Thus it was only a matter of time before Skinner went to his closet and found it empty.

"Fox – where are my shirts?" He asked tersely.

Mulder smiled pleasantly.

"At the cleaners I guess," he said casually. He finished dressing and pecked his Master on the cheek. "See you later, Walter!" he declared, wondering when the big man would notice that he was treating him more like a lover than a Master.

When Mulder caught a glimpse of his Master at work later in the day, Skinner was wearing a shirt at least two sizes too small for him – so Mulder guessed his Master had borrowed one of his slave's shirts for the day. He looked faintly ridiculous; the short cuffs revealed far too much wrist, the straining buttons were stretched almost to breaking point across his broad chest, and the top buttons were undone because the collar was simply too small for him. Skinner had made sad but determined efforts to camouflage the ill fitting shirt with rolled-up sleeves and a brighter than usual tie but even so, he looked nothing like his usual pristine self.

The sight of his Master thus attired might have amused Mulder if it hadn't been for the haggard cast of Skinner's face and the dark, haunted look in his eyes. Mulder decided that enough was enough – he'd force the pace tonight no matter what, and finally make his Master accept the comfort he was so longing to give – even if it meant his own butt had to be thoroughly warmed in the process. Mulder secretly loved spankings, but somehow he had the feeling that the spanking he'd end up with if he kept pushing his Master like this would be good deal harder than he usually enjoyed receiving. Not that he minded – it was all in a good cause.

When he got home later that evening, he deliberately dumped an empty take-out bag on the table with a satisfied smile.

"I hope you got yourself something to eat, Walter. I grabbed some Thai food on the way home so I'm not hungry," he called to his Master who was standing in the kitchen. Mulder wandered in and gave the other man an affectionate peck on the cheek. "Make me a cup of coffee there's a good boy," he said, wincing inside at his choice of words. He patted Skinner's ass fondly and then went back into the dining room, his heart thumping in his chest, expecting to hear his Master's outraged roar at any second, or at least for there to be **some** kind of reaction...but there wasn't.

Mulder sighed, and decided he had no choice but to just keep on going. He sat himself down at the dining room table, pushed his chair back, and put his feet up on the shining surface. Then he grabbed his Master's newspaper out of his briefcase, discarded the news section all over the floor, and buried himself in the sports section. Skinner emerged a few seconds later, without the coffee. He barely seemed to register the mess in the room, and began walking upstairs towards their bedroom.

"Hey – where's my coffee?" Mulder demanded. Skinner paused and glanced back.

"Sorry?" He looked confused.

"I asked you to make me a coffee. You can clear up this mess too while you're at it!" Mulder added, waving his hand around at the paper-strewn floor. Skinner seemed to see the mess for the first time and he wrinkled up his brow.

"Mulder, don't push me," he warned, in a low, choking tone, before disappearing up the stairs. Mulder decided that it was time to do just that; he had his Master on the run – now it was time to corner him. He raced up the stairs after Skinner and found his Master standing in the bedroom, unbuttoning his too-small shirt, preparing for a shower or bath.

Taking his life in his hands, Mulder decided it was time to say the one word he thought might get a reaction. He strode up behind his Master, put his arms around the big man, stilling Skinner's fingers on the buttons, leaned forward, and spoke one word into his Master's ear, in a low, dominant tone.

"Wanda."

Skinner froze.

"What did you say?" He growled.

"You heard me. Get on your knees, boy," Mulder hissed. "I want to fuck your ass. No questions. No arguments. Just do it."

Skinner shook him off like an angry lion lashing out at a cub. He turned and grabbed hold of Mulder's shoulders with his hands. He wasn't grasping tight enough to hurt, but it was enough to immobilise Mulder.

"Who is the Master and who is the slave around here?" Skinner demanded angrily. Mulder shrugged, never breaking eye contact even for a second.

"I don't know," he replied. "Who is the Master around here?"

Skinner's expression darkened. "You need a reminder, do you?" He asked.

Mulder felt his heart skip a beat – this was what he had wanted to see. At last Skinner had broken out of that distant, lost trance he had been in for the past few weeks, and was getting angry about something.

"I think I do, yes," he said.

"Yes - **what?**" Skinner shook him bodily.

"Yes - nothing." Mulder shrugged again. "If you want me to address you as 'Master' then you'll have to make me believe my Master is still in there," he challenged.

Skinner took a ragged intake of breath.

"I'm waiting," Mulder hissed. "My insolent ass is waiting too." He wriggled his ass provocatively – his hips undulating against his Master's body as he did so.

With a low roar, Skinner grabbed Mulder's wrist, sat down on the bed, and drew Mulder over his lap in one swift movement. Mulder went willingly, his heart zinging. They were finally starting to get somewhere! Skinner tore Mulder's pants and boxers off him and placed one heavy hand on Mulder's back. Mulder wriggled, arching his back, loving the feel of the cool air wafting over his soon-to-be-tanned ass. He had waited a long time for this – and he sensed that both he and his Master needed a long, cathartic spanking, to restore a sense of order to their world and to bring them closer together, the way a spanking always did. Mulder wasn't sure how it worked its magic alchemy – usually when he was undergoing a thorough tanning he wanted to be anywhere else in the universe, but when it was over, he and his Master were usually closer than ever, and it was in the post-spanking lull that they often exchanged their most intimate secrets and tender words.

Mulder braced himself over Skinner's knee as the first heavy swat landed on his ass cheeks.

"Ow!" He kicked up his legs. It always took him a little while to get warmed up, and the first few swats always stung unbearably. Skinner's big hand wasn't going gently about its task either – it rained down spank after spank on his naked, unprotected bottom, the slaps coming so hard and so fast that Mulder wasn't sure he was remembering to breathe.

For a moment he panicked, wondering whether Skinner would go too far in his anger - and then something magical happened. Suddenly they were connected, and an old, familiar, much-loved rhythm kicked in. He was moving in time to the slaps, sliding rhythmically back to meet each slap and then forward under the force of them, and Skinner's hand on his back was keeping him in place, the movement of his big thighs anchoring Mulder, keeping him safe. He could hear Skinner's heartbeat through his Master's thin cotton shirt, could feel his Master's solid warmth radiating up through his solid thighs.

This was where they belonged – both of them, performing this age-old dance that couldn't have been more beautiful if it had been choreographed. It had a ritual and pace all of its own and they soon settled into it. Skinner's anger was extinguished by the ritual, which soon took on its own flavour and dimension, unrelated to the events that had caused it. Now Mulder was flying, and Skinner was there with him, flying alongside him. Mulder realised with a start that it was always this way. He was usually so preoccupied with his own endorphin high that he failed to realise that his Master experienced one too.

Like Wanda enjoying her biting games, Skinner loved roasting his slave's white rump, loved the patterns his hand left on Mulder's flesh and the way Mulder responded to his touch. Mulder felt connected with his Master's enjoyment of the event in a way he never had before. His ass was on fire – it felt as if it were heating up, and Skinner was stoking that fire higher and higher until Mulder wanted to sing and sob at one and the same time.

"Master...Master...you are my Master..." Mulder repeated the words over and over again but he knew that neither of them were ready to stop yet. He yowled as Skinner made up for three weeks lack of spanking by turning his attention to Mulder's thighs. Mulder hated it when Skinner spanked him here, and yet, conversely, he loved it precisely because he hated it so much – and because his Master knew he hated it so much. He loved that his Master made him suffer something he disliked, purely to enforce the notion of his own mastery over his slave. That helped Mulder travel the last distance into subspace and soon he was flying high as a kite, wilfully abandoned over his Master's knee, accepting his every hard swat, repeatedly chanting the mantra "Master, Master, Master..." over and over again because they both needed to hear it.

Finally, the swats started to slow, and then they stopped, leaving a raging, stinging warmth in Mulder's bottom. He lay there for a second, getting his breath back, and then he slid off Skinner's lap and knelt, waiting for what he knew had to happen next, what needed to happen next. Skinner's eyes were dark – he was lost in top-space the way that Mulder was lost in sub-space. He leaned forward, grasped Mulder's chin roughly in his hand, and said the one word they both knew he had to say, the one word that would restore the status quo between them, finally and irrevocably.

"Wanda."

Mulder scrambled instantly into position over the end of the bed. He grabbed the footboard, and a moment later felt the rough fabric of his Master's wool pants on his sore ass as Skinner came to stand behind him. He heard the sound of a zip, and then winced as his Master laid deliberately heavy hands on his glowing, heated bottom. Mulder knew that a red ass was the equivalent of a red rag to a bull for Skinner. His Master loved fondling a thoroughly spanked bottom the way Mulder loved receiving a thoroughly spanked bottom. Skinner grabbed his buttocks and fondled roughly for several long minutes, making Mulder cry out, and sending his endorphins sky high once more.

"This ass needs reminding who is in charge around here," Skinner growled.

"Yes, Master!" Mulder agreed easily, longing to feel his Master's hard cock deep inside him. He was as turned on as Skinner was by the thought of his Master taking him hard and fast while his bottom glowed between them, red and hot. He wriggled against the bed, his cock stiff and hungry. "A nice hot ass, just the way I like it," Skinner murmured, pinching Mulder's sore bottom until he squealed. "Stay in position, boy. Your Master can do what the hell he likes with this ass," Skinner said in a low, throaty, utterly sexually dominant tone. "Well?" Skinner demanded. "Can't he?" He said, roughly slapping Mulder's bottom with his hand.

"Yes, Master! It belongs to you, Master!" Mulder panted, longing to ease the pressure in his cock but knowing that was forbidden. When Skinner used the "Wanda" command then he was demanding that only his own pleasure was addressed, only his own needs were fulfilled – that way Mulder came to reach the beautiful serenity of subspace, which was a reward of and by itself, even without orgasm.

"Good. I'm glad you understand that, boy. I'm going to fuck you hard until you scream," Skinner promised. Mulder didn't think it would take much to make him scream by that point – he just wanted his Master to hurry up and fill him with that magnificent cock of his. A few seconds later he had his wish as his Master grabbed each of his buttocks in rough hands and pulled them apart. Mulder let out a yelp as Skinner thrust his hard cock deep into Mulder's anus with one swift, almost brutal motion. For a moment Mulder wasn't sure that he would be able to remain standing in position, as that cock filled him completely, the speed and urgency of the entrance making his eyes water.

"Who owns you, boy?" Skinner hissed fiercely.

"You do, Master," Mulder replied quickly.

Skinner shifted his weight, but remained embedded to the hilt within his slave's body. Mulder tried to remain still, to become accustomed to the enormous size of the intruder that had so suddenly distended him, and to remain standing under the weight of his Master as Skinner leaned over his back, pressing him down, keeping him in one place.

"Good. Just so you remember, I'm going to stay here for a moment, so I can enjoy the feel of your tight ass around my cock. Oh you feel good," Skinner purred, his large hands playing with his slave's body. They travelled around the front of Mulder's chest and tweaked his nipples, just pinching at first, and then squeezed hard. "What belongs to me?" He asked, his breathing coming in hard, sexy pants.

"All of me!" Mulder replied in a voice that sounded high pitched to his own ears.

"Do these?" Skinner squeezed his nipples unmercifully hard. Mulder twisted underneath him but the huge weight of his Master on his back meant that he couldn't move.

"Yes, Master! They belong to you. I belong to you. Every part of me!" he panted, relaxing and giving himself up to his Master's rough attentions. He loved it when Skinner made love to him slowly, tenderly, and erotically, but there was also a secret part of him that thrilled to see his Master in full caveman mode, taking his pleasures roughly, and reminding Mulder that he was a slave and would serve him as such, giving up his own body willingly and with no thought for his own pleasure or enjoyment.

"Good." Skinner removed his hands from Mulder's nipples, much to Mulder's relief, and slapped the side of Mulder's ass approvingly. "Now hold on because I'm going to ride you good and hard," Skinner warned.

He was true to his word and the next moment he pulled back and then thrust in again so hard that Mulder had to hold onto the bed with all his strength to keep upright. Skinner's pace was almost brutal, but Mulder felt they both needed that right now – Skinner needed to know that he could pound into his slave, be as authoritative and dominant as he liked, and that Mulder wouldn't break. On the contrary – that he would find it totally and utterly exhilarating. Skinner's pace was such that it couldn't last long and soon he was coming forcefully inside his slave, and then they both lay there, panting, for a long time, while they slowly came down from their great high, sanity slowly creeping back in. Then Skinner pulled out, and reached, with utterly gentle hands, for his slave. He pried Mulder away from the bed rail, and cradled him in his arms.

"Are you okay?" He murmured.

"I'm fine, Master – more than fine...I'm feeling pretty damn wonderful. How about you?" Mulder reached out and gently caressed Skinner's face. At least his Master's skin had lost that pale, haggard look, although his eyes were still dark, and troubled.

"I'm...not sure." Skinner gave a faint smile and sat down on the bed, with an exhausted sigh. Mulder knelt down behind him, wrapped his arms around Skinner's chest, and held him tightly for a long time, pressing his cheek against his Master's.

"Talk to me about it," he said softly. His Master sighed again but still didn't speak. "Walter, it wasn't your fault," Mulder said at last, not wanting to give his Master the opportunity to take refuge in silence. "You were told to order the swat team in. It wasn't your decision."

"They were my men. I knew it was the wrong thing to do. I should have argued more forcefully."

"You argued your case for three hours, Walter," Mulder pointed out gently.

"I should have refused the order." Skinner squared his shoulders. "It was my responsibility and my men and those hostages are dead because I didn't do the right thing."

"You couldn't have known it would end the way it did. It might have turned out okay – you can't get everything right, Walter. You just have to do the best job you can," Mulder told him firmly.

Skinner was silent again, but his dark, troubled eyes remained fixed on his hands. Mulder's heart went out to his Master. He gently pulled Skinner over so that he was lying on the bed, lay down beside him and put his arms around his Master.

"You can't allow it to make you question every order you give. You've given many successful orders that have saved lives over the years," Mulder pointed out. "If you become inhibited then you won't be doing your job properly." Skinner's eyes flashed behind his wire-rimmed glasses as he acknowledged where Mulder was headed. "You still know the right moves to make, Master," Mulder whispered, gently caressing the side of Skinner's face. "You just made them with me. The world needs you to be your usual strong, decisive self. I need you to be that...and, Walter, more importantly, **you** need it too. What we just did must have shown you that. You won't hurt people just by being yourself. You didn't hurt me just now – well, not in any way I didn't thoroughly enjoy!" Mulder grinned. "Being dominant is in your nature – giving orders at work and in the bedroom – that's what makes you, you. If you keep on questioning yourself like this you'll destroy what's fundamental to your personality. Don't go there, Walter. Don't do that. Accept that sometimes bad things happen and it isn't always your fault for not being good enough or not being clairvoyant enough to predict the outcome." He grinned and tweaked Skinner's ear lovingly and was rewarded when Skinner finally gave a faint smile.

"You've been psycho-analysing me, slave," he commented. "You've been deliberately trying to get a reaction out of me these past few days."

Mulder grinned. "It was necessary, Master."

"What we just did..." Skinner glanced around the bedroom, bemused.

"Was fantastic," Mulder finished for him.

Skinner shook his head, still stunned. "I felt like everything I gave out just now came back to me twofold from you, making me go even further until I felt sure we would burn up," he murmured. "I don't think I've ever hit that kind of high during top-space before. It was fantastic. I've always worried that if I ever really let myself go and fly that high, that I might end up doing you some kind of damage," Skinner admitted.

"You couldn't," Mulder told him firmly. "Your judgement and your instincts are too good for that – and so is your ability to command and to be in charge. The same thing goes at work – you do a good job, Walter. Stop questioning yourself."

Skinner thought about it for a long time, and then nodded. He leaned forward and bestowed a long, loving kiss on Mulder's lips. "You are the finest slave a Master could ever have, Fox," he whispered.

Mulder felt as if his whole body was glowing with pride at the words.

"And you are the finest Master," he replied.

"Fox..." Skinner's voice took on a slightly dangerous tone and he gently stroked one of Mulder's nipples. "The missing rings - don't think I didn't notice them. Make sure that situation is rectified soon, slave, or I can promise you that your ass will be smarting again before very long."

"Yes, Master. No Master." Mulder grinned delightedly. "It's good to have you back, Master," he added softly.

"It's good to be back, slave," Skinner grinned in return. And then, as if to punctuate the point, he turned Mulder onto his front and delivered one firm, stinging slap to his slave's bottom.

"OW! What's that for?" Mulder complained.

"That's for forgetting to pick up the damn laundry so that I had to wear this ridiculously tight shirt all day," Skinner growled.

"Oh god. You did look terrible buttoned up in my shirt!" Mulder laughed. The laughter bubbled up inside him and came gurgling to the surface where it exploded into a fit of uncontrollable giggles. Skinner joined in, and they laughed helplessly in each other's arms. They laughed until they ached, the tension of the past few weeks dissipating as a result of what had just taken place between them.

"Catharsis," Mulder murmured weakly when they stopped. "It's weird – I knew spanking could be cathartic for me, the one being spanked, but I never guessed how much it could be a release for the person handing it out until today."

Skinner gathered Mulder in his arms and held him tight. "It was very cathartic," he whispered. "And it was just what I needed. Thank you, Fox."

"You're welcome, Master." Mulder smiled and snuggled close against the big man's chest, overjoyed to have his Master back.

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