

Frontiers by Xanthe

<http://www.xanthe.org/frontiers/>

Story Notes:

Xanthe note: This was written for my good friend, Alleycat, in response to a discussion amongst fellow discipline aficionados about our favorite western-type shows, so it's a kind of homage to that sort of universe. If the idea of a 15 year old Mulder in a father/son type relationship with Skinner squicks you, or homespun sentimentality makes you barf, please don't read on!

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Part One: Westward Leap by Xanthe

Mulder stormed out of Skinner's office, and almost threw himself down the stairs in his haste to get out of the building.

"Jerk..." he muttered under his breath. "Anyone would think I was 15 years old, not thirty five." He ran all the way down several flights of stairs, slammed every door he encountered and finally wound up beside his car. It had been a long and difficult meeting, and Mulder was still flushed bright red from the humiliation and embarrassment of it. Skinner had kept him standing throughout - on purpose, of course. "Just one of his 'humiliate the agents' tricks." Mulder muttered, pounding the open palm of his hand against his car and then screwing up his face as he realized that little display of bad temper had hurt.

He had stood for half an hour in Skinner's office, justifying the methods he had used in his latest case, and explaining away 2 wrecked cars and another missing-presumed-dead cell phone. Half an excruciating hour, while Skinner had prowled around the room, pulling him up on certain points, making him explain everything over and over again, and all the time unnerving him with that slow, insistent pacing. Mulder had just about managed to hold onto his temper as Skinner had spent the last ten minutes of their meeting systematically bawling him out and giving him the sort of lecture that reminded him of his teenage years when he had broken curfew. Damn! he cursed, hating Skinner, hating everything. He got into his car and screeched out of the garage, still muttering to himself under his breath. Skinner had just stopped short of putting him on tape surveillance for which he supposed he should be grateful, but frankly, Mulder was still smarting too much from that lecture to feel much gratitude.

It was late by the time he got home. He threw himself down on the couch with a take out pizza and several cans of beer and flicked idly through the channels. Cheery music assaulted his senses, and he groaned as he saw an unnaturally happy little girl bounce and skip her way down a grassy hill. "*Little House on the Prairie*? I don't **think** so," he said firmly, flicking to another channel. His attention was caught by a posse of men in cowboy outfits riding towards a ranch.

"Ah, the Ponderosa. I haven't seen *Bonanza* in years." He leaned back and took a bite of pizza, watching as Ben Cartwright delivered a lecture to a young miscreant called "Jamie." After a couple of minutes, Mulder shifted uneasily. This was eerily reminiscent of his own meeting with Skinner earlier, and he didn't want to be reminded of **that**. He switched channel again to find Jim-Bob Walton being given a dressing down by his father, John. "Oh for god's sake. What is this? 'Cute Homespun Frontier Schmaltz' evening? Even the TV is against me," he fumed, switching channels again. Albert Ingalls was making a mumbled apology to a stern-faced Pa. "Stop it!" he zapped once more, and sat back with a sigh, as he recognized Sam Beckett. "*Quantum Leap*. Thank god. I should be safe from lectures here." He took a swig of beer, closed his eyes, and immediately fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes again, the television screen had gone dark, except for a swirling black and white geometric pattern which grew wider and wider as he watched. "Ah... *Time Tunnel*...great..." Mulder mumbled, still half asleep. A few moments later the black and white image opened up, leapt out of the television, and swallowed him whole.

Mulder had a sensation of being swirled around, his whole body rocked and buffeted, and then he felt himself falling from a great height. He landed with a thud that knocked all the breath out of him, and sent a shooting pain up his ankle. His head crashed against a stone, and he cried out, before losing consciousness.

"Son? Are you all right?"

Mulder struggled to open his eyes. It was dark, and his head hurt. He tried to move and gasped as a sharp pain stabbed in his ankle.

"It's okay. Where does it hurt? Your ankle? Hold on." Mulder felt gentle hands probe his leg.

"I don't think it's broken, just a really nasty sprain. Now, I don't know where you came from, but I think you need some help. Can you put your hands around my neck?"

Mulder managed to open his eyes a fraction, and then opened them wide in shocked surprise. He was lying on a patch of grass in the middle of a field - and the man leaning over him, talking to him gently, was none other than his boss, Assistant Director Skinner.

"Sir...what are you doing here?" he croaked, his voice sounding strange to his ears. "Where is here?" He tried to remember what had happened. He'd been sitting in his apartment, hadn't he?

"It's okay, son. Hold on. I'm going to carry you back to the house. Ready?" Skinner's face broke into a reassuring smile as he put his arms under Mulder's shoulders and knees.

"No...I'll get up...you can't carry me, I'm too heavy..." Mulder broke off as Skinner swung him effortlessly into his arms.

"Heavy? Nonsense!" Skinner grinned. "You're a scrawny young thing. How old are you? You can't be more than what, 15? What on earth were you doing out here?"

"I don't know." Mulder stared at his boss in surprise. 15? What the hell was the other man talking about? His head hurt too much to make sense of it though, so he just lay back, held on tight to Skinner's neck, and allowed himself to be carried back to the house.

The "house" turned out to be a small wooden farmhouse, not much more than a cabin really.

Skinner laid him in a cot, and pulled a blanket over him.

"Hold still, son. I'll get some water and clean up that gash you've got there." He gestured to Mulder's head. Mulder lay back, weakly trying to process this information. <I was watching TV. All those old frontier shows...Is this a dream? Am I imagining all this?> Skinner returned, with a bowl of water, which he placed on a hand-carved table next to the bed.

"It's...pretty..." Mulder fingered a pattern of oak leaves and acorns that adorned the small table.

"I carved it myself." Skinner smiled, dipping a washcloth in the bowl and gently dabbing at Mulder's forehead. "I carved most of the things in this house. I like working with wood."

Mulder winced, and Skinner paused. "Sorry, son. It's a nasty cut you've got here. Now I don't think you're well enough for a lot of questions, but can you tell me your name at least?"

"Mulder...Fox Mulder." Mulder muttered, starting to shiver.

"Fox. Okay. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance then, young Fox. My name's Walter Skinner." Skinner held out his hand and Mulder shook it, noticing how his own hand was dwarfed by the other man's big paw. "Look, Fox - you're shivering and I'm worried about your injuries. I'm going to get Dr. Scully to take a look at you."

"Dr. Scully?" Mulder put a hand on the other man's arm, his heart beating loudly.

"That's right. I'm sorry I can't afford the real Doctor, but I've always found Dr. Scully to be a mighty fine substitute. I always called her out to my boys when they were sick. Between you and me, I'm not very fond of Dr. Colton."

"Her...? Scully?" Mulder whispered.

"Yeah, she's a lady doctor. I know that's unusual. She's not properly qualified of course, but her father was the local doctor hereabouts for years on end and he taught her everything he knew. Like I said, I'd trust her over that Colton fellow any day, and I always call her Dr. Scully whether she's got the piece of paper to prove it or not. Now, I'm going to leave you tucked

up here while I saddle up my horse and go and find her. Don't you go moving, young Fox, d'you hear me? I won't be long. I'll leave you some water here, and I'll put another log on the fire to keep it burning. Will you be all right, son?"

"I think so," Mulder whispered. He watched as Skinner got up to go. The other man was wearing a thick, creamy-colored shirt and dark, mud-stained pants. He looked as if he'd spent all day in the fields, not behind a desk. Mulder felt suddenly scared at the thought of being left alone in this strange house, in this even stranger world.

"Hey, it's all right. I'll be back soon," Skinner promised, ruffling his hair. "I promise, and I always keep my promises, Fox. Close your eyes and you won't even notice I'm gone."

"Couldn't you just call for help?" Mulder suggested. "Don't you have a cell phone?"

"A what?" Skinner frowned. "I could call, maybe, but even if I hollered my head off, I don't think anyone would hear me all the way out here! Now close your eyes and get some rest."

Mulder did as he was told, listening as the big man left the house. He heard hooves clattering and then fading into the distance, and as soon as they had gone, he sat up, and got out of the bed. He nearly fell over as soon as he stood up. His ankle hurt so much, and his head was still throbbing. He dragged himself over to the fireplace, and looked around. He was, to all intents and purposes, in an old-fashioned frontier dwelling. He saw nothing in the house that he could place as belonging to any time period later than the 1880's, but his mind refused to process the implications of that observation.

He ran his fingers over an ornately carved christening cup, and then saw an old photograph in a carved wooden frame. He glanced at it, then looked back again, picking it up. It was black and white, and relatively new, but he recognized two of the faces in the photo. One was Skinner, a few years younger than he was now, his hand on the shoulder of a teenage boy. The other person he recognized as being Sharon Skinner. She was holding a wriggling baby on her lap. Another boy stood in front of them both, his face serious and unsmiling in the style of old photographs, yet with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"Family group, huh?" Mulder was about to put the photograph back when he caught a glimpse of himself in a small mirror. "Shit!" The words came out of the innocent, sweet-natured face of a boy of about 15 years of age. He had clear skin, not even the faintest hint of a beard, and wide eyes with long, thick eyelashes. His nose was less defined, and his dark brown hair hung down over his eyes. Mulder was reminded suddenly of Sam Beckett - only this was no stranger's body he was inside. It was himself, utterly and undeniably himself, about 20 years younger than when he had last looked at himself in the mirror. Mulder stared for several long seconds, and then, soundlessly and gracefully, he dropped to the floor in a dead faint. The photograph hit the floor with a crash, smashing glass in all directions.

"Fox! Damn, boy, I told you not to move. Excuse my language, Doctor." Skinner rushed towards the body of his prone guest, and picked him up carefully, carrying him back to the bed and laying him down.

"Sir..." Mulder stirred, and glanced up. "I'm sorry... your photograph." He gestured, feebly at the scattered remnants on the floor.

"Never mind - it's just paper and glass, you're real flesh and blood. I thought I told you to stay put?"

"You did. Sorry, sir." Mulder smiled weakly. He'd only been in this "universe" or wherever it was for a couple of hours, and he was already in trouble. Skinner just smiled at him. "I've brought the doctor to see you." He beckoned, and Mulder held his breath as the tiny, beautiful figure of his red-haired partner came into sight.

"Scully? I'm so glad to see you," he whispered.

"It's Miss Scully to you, young man," she scolded. "I hear you've been up to no good."

"I fell." Mulder shrugged.

"I can see that." Scully swept close and Mulder noticed that, like Skinner, she was wearing old-fashioned clothing - a white cotton high-necked blouse, and a sweeping black skirt. Her long red hair was coiled up into an elegant knot at the back of her head, but a few tendrils had crept out and were tickling the sides of her pale cheeks. She laid a cool hand on his forehead, and smiled down at him.

"You look beautiful like that, Scully," he whispered, and heard Skinner roar with laughter.

"He's quite the charmer for his age," Scully commented with a stern look at him. She ran her fingers gently over his ankle. "It's not broken, but it's badly swollen. Do you have an icehouse, Mr. Skinner?"

"Yes. I'll go and get some ice now. I should have thought of that before, but I was so surprised to just come across the boy like that." Skinner disappeared and returned a few moments later with some ice, which he wrapped in a handkerchief and gave to Scully. She laid it on Mulder's ankle and it soon went coldly, and pleasantly numb.

"I don't think there's any permanent damage done. He's just taken a tumble. Maybe he fell from his horse?" Scully suggested.

"Is that what happened, Fox?" Skinner asked.

"I don't remember," Mulder replied. Now was not the time to start talking about the FBI and the X Files. He had a feeling it would just convince his erstwhile colleagues that he was suffering from concussion.

"What about your home, your family?" Skinner asked. "It's late. They'll be worried about you. I know I would be if you were my boy."

"I don't know." Mulder muttered miserably, unable to explain.

"You don't remember your family?" Scully exchanged a glance with Skinner.

"No. I don't." Mulder lied.

"Well you're too young to be out and about on your own. Why you're no older than..." Skinner stopped, biting his lip, and Scully laid a sympathetic hand on his arm. Mulder gazed from one to the other, wondering what was going on. "You can stay here for now," Skinner continued. "I don't have much, but what I do have is yours until we can find out where you came from," Skinner told him firmly. "For now, let's just get you better, shall we?"

Mulder nodded and closed his eyes, suddenly feeling sleepy. When I wake up, I'll be home, he thought to himself. Home...he drifted off, dreaming of his apartment, his work, his car, all the trappings of his normal everyday life. Home.

Mulder awoke to the most delicious smell. He opened his eyes and sat up, wondering where he was.

"You're awake then?" A voice said. He looked up into a pair of friendly dark eyes, and the events of the previous evening came flooding back.

"Oh shit," he whispered.

Skinner frowned. "I don't know what sort of home you come from, Fox, but I don't like language like that in my house. Please remember that." He smiled, and ran a hand through Mulder's tousled hair. Mulder drew back, and immediately felt guilty as he saw the look of sadness flash across Skinner's face.

"Sorry. I used to do that to my boys all the time. You're not either of them. My apologies. Are you hungry? There's bacon, pancakes..." Skinner let out a roar of laughter as Mulder got up and eagerly limped over to the sturdy wooden table. "Growing boys are the same everywhere - always starving!" The big man commented. "Here you go then, Fox. Eat well." He spooned an enormous breakfast onto Mulder's plate, and Mulder was surprised to find that he was starving - just as Skinner had said. He forgot about his predicament as he devoured his food. "Looks like you're feeling better then." Skinner commented. "You certainly look better. Last night you were as white as a sheet. Do you remember any more, Fox?"

"No." Mulder mumbled, his mouth full of food. Skinner shook his head.

"Don't speak with your mouth full, Fox," he scolded mildly, "and slow down. The food will still be there if you eat slowly." Mulder did as he was told, savoring the delicious breakfast. "Your clothes are filthy." Skinner glanced at them. Mulder looked down, and realized for the first time that he was wearing a shirt several sizes too big for him, and his dress pants, which were at least a foot too long for him. He remembered having taken his tie off before he sat down to watch television. Skinner was right - his clothes **were** filthy, and they were torn in places as well.

"I've got some clothes that will fit you." Skinner said, and his eyes were sad. "I'll get them out. You can wash outside under the pump."

"The pump?" Mulder looked up. He longed for a warm shower but he had a sudden realization that what he was going to get was a very cold dunking instead. "I'm not that dirty," he muttered.

"Yes you are." Skinner told him firmly. "If you've finished you can wash up straight away." He took Mulder's plate and held the door open for him.

Mulder limped half heartedly into the yard and stood by the pump, glaring at it. "Come on, boy. Clothes off." Skinner ordered. Mulder stared at the man miserably. "Quickly. Come on." Skinner motioned, and, flushing to the roots of his hair, Mulder slipped out of his enormous clothing and ran shivering beneath the water, as Skinner worked the pump. Skinner made him stay there until the blood and dirt were washed from his hair, and he was quite clean, by which time Mulder was sure that he would never be warm again. He was also shocked and dismayed by his body. He was so skinny! And small - and in one area in particular **much** smaller than he remembered which wasn't good news at all. He didn't have any hair on his chest, and his legs and arms were like sticks. Mulder sighed. As far as he could recall, 15 wasn't a good age to be. It was an age of raging hormones, and arguments with parents. It was an age when you had piles of homework to do every night, and the whole world was against you. What the hell was he doing here, he wondered? And how the hell was he going to get back to where he belonged?

Skinner finally released him from the water torture, and he half limped, half ran back into the house, and crouched beside the fire, wrapping himself in the large sheet that Skinner had thoughtfully laid out for him. Skinner opened up a big old chest, and brought him a shirt and pants, similar to those he was wearing.

"They're a little bit big, but they'll do." Skinner smiled. "Here's a pair of boots too. Those fancy shoes you were wearing were far too big for you, and the workmanship is atrocious. Some people take no pride in their work." He shook his head, examining Mulder's shoes and then placing them on the fire, along with his other clothes. Mulder opened his mouth to protest, but the deed was done, and the clothes had been torn and dirty so he closed it again. Mulder pulled the new clothes on, and then Skinner crouched down beside him and ran a comb through his tangled hair, taking care not to hurt his head wound.

"There. Good as new - and smelling a lot fresher too!" Skinner grinned, holding up the mirror for Mulder to look in. Mulder stared back at himself glumly. He saw a bright, shiny, newly washed teenager, and he wasn't at all happy about it. He wasn't happy **at all**.

"I went into town early this morning and put up some signs about you," Skinner told him. "I expect someone will turn up to claim you, sooner or later."

"Maybe." Mulder shrugged, feeling fairly certain that nobody would. "What if they don't?" He glanced anxiously at Skinner.

"I told you last night - you can stay here." Skinner smiled. "I could use an extra pair of hands around the place when you're feeling better."

"What about when your wife and kids come back?" Mulder asked. "I mean...there's not much space here..."

"They won't be coming back," Skinner said softly. "Now, I'm going out to do some chores. Why don't you make yourself useful washing the breakfast things? Then take a nap. I want you to get as much rest as possible."

"Yes, sir." Mulder nodded, wondering where Skinner's family was. In his own world, Sharon had divorced her husband, so maybe that's what had happened here too.

"You are strange." Skinner stopped, and looked at Mulder suddenly, a quizzical expression on his face. "One moment so polite, calling me 'sir', and the next using foul language. I don't quite know what to make of you, Fox."

"Would you rather I called you something else, sir?" Mulder asked.

"Well...sir will do for now, but it's a bit formal. Maybe later on we can think of something else. If you're still here later on." Skinner added. Mulder felt a sensation of dread grip him. He was all alone in this strange world, and although he had memories of a different place, and time, of being older, he didn't **feel** older. The longer he spent in this 15-year-old body, the more he felt as if he **was** 15 years old again. He felt as if he had more energy, but he was also gawky and graceless as well. <Shit, of all the goddamn awful ages to be, 15 has to be the worst.> He sighed. Skinner gave him a smile and tousled his head again, clearly forgetting that he had promised not to.

"Don't worry, Fox. I'm not going to throw you out," he said reassuringly. "I said you can stay here and you can."

"But, supposing I never regain my memory - and supposing nobody comes to claim me?" Mulder blurted, feeling anxious. He didn't have the skills to survive in this world. Damn, he was used to electricity and cell phones - he didn't know anything about living in this age, and he was 15 years old, and thin with it. He wasn't sure he was strong enough in this body to do a full day's work in the fields, or on the railroads, or wherever else there might be work. He doubted that he **could** look after himself in this universe, and he was pretty damn sure there were no social services or child welfare people to see to it that he was fed and clothed.

"Then you'll stay here for as long as you want." Skinner said firmly.

"You don't even know me!" Mulder blinked, brushing a long strand of hair out of his eyes and wondering when he had grown bangs. "I could be anyone! I could be a...a...murderer or something."

"I doubt that." Skinner grinned. "Maybe we've never met before, Fox, but I feel as if I know you. One thing I do know for sure - just by looking at you - is that you're not a bad boy, Fox."

Lively, and high spirited I have no doubt, but that's the way it should be with a boy your age. Not evil, or malicious, or bad though. You're certainly no murderer - I'd stake my life on that." He gave Mulder another reassuring smile, and then left the house.

Left alone, Mulder cleared the table and tried to think through the events of the past twenty-four hours. Everything felt like a dream, and he couldn't make sense of it. One moment he had been watching television, and the next he had been whisked here, to this world, where Walter Skinner was an impoverished farmer, Dana Scully a country doctor, and he...he was a 15 year old boy. It didn't make sense. He looked at himself in the mirror again, still unused to his appearance, and tried to figure out some sort of reason for all this. The only logical thing he could think of, was that somehow the programs he had been watching had entered his psyche, and his subconscious mind was now jumbling them up as he dreamed. Yet it didn't feel like a dream. It felt real. Unable to come up with any better analysis than that he was dreaming and would soon wake up, Mulder began to wash the dishes.

Mulder spent the next few days mooching around the homestead with Skinner, doing some chores, talking, and trying to gain any clues to his strange situation from the big man. This Skinner seemed fairly like his counterpart that Mulder knew from the FBI. He was strong, hard working, and not particularly chatty. He was also very good at giving orders, as Mulder soon found out when he was set to work performing various chores.

Skinner laughed his head off as it became painfully obvious that Mulder didn't know one end of a cow from another and was thus hopeless at milking. He didn't know how to saddle or ride a horse either, which Skinner found perplexing. He spent several long hours teaching Mulder the basics until Mulder was heartily sick of Skinner's sturdy gray mare, Alice, although she was as patient with him as her master had been.

"So, you can't ride, or milk, you have no idea how to plow or harvest, you've never trimmed a lamp, and you don't know how to chop firewood...what **can** you do exactly?" Skinner asked him one evening as Mulder grumbled over the number of logs he'd had to chop before his boss, surrogate father, or whatever Skinner now was to him, would allow him to sit down and eat his dinner.

"I can read and write pretty well." Mulder replied defensively, somewhat embarrassed by his lack of knowledge of even the rudiments of everyday life in the late 19th century.

"Show me." Skinner took out a slate and handed Mulder some chalk. Mulder looked up, inquiringly. "I won't waste good paper and ink on you until I know what you can do." Skinner told him. "Freddie and Ben used to do their homework in rough on that slate and show it to me before I'd allow them to copy it into his school book."

"Freddie and Ben?" Mulder asked.

"My sons." Skinner glanced at the photograph that was resting on the mantle, nestled in a newly carved frame but without glass as yet.

"Where are they now?" Mulder asked, curious.

"Never mind." Skinner pointed to the slate. "Just show me this writing that you're so proud of."

Mulder did as he was told, and wrote a sentence on the slate. Skinner sighed, and shook his head.

"You call this writing?" He asked.

"What's wrong with it?" Mulder challenged, perplexed. It was his usual loopy scrawl.

"**This** is what I call writing." Skinner wiped away Mulder's effort, and wrote the same sentence again in a perfect copperplate hand.

"That's not writing...that's goddamn calligraphy!" Mulder exploded.

"Fox." Skinner's tone held a warning.

"Sorry," Mulder mumbled.

"You really must learn to watch your tongue, boy," Skinner remarked. "Or you'll find yourself getting into all sorts of hot water at school."

"School?" Mulder looked up, aghast. Just when he thought this nightmare couldn't get any worse, it proved him wrong by doing just that.

"Well, this clinches it for me." Skinner waved his hand at the slate. "You need some schooling, son. I'm in favor of education - it can improve a man's lot in life. I'm content being a farmer, but you might not be. One day you might want something more."

"I don't want to go to school!" Mulder exclaimed. "I'm too old!"

"You're 15. That's not too old in my book," Skinner told him firmly. "I'll take you there tomorrow. I have to go into town first thing anyway. I'll walk you there and meet you afterwards to walk home again, so that you have some idea of the route. After that you can make your own way there each day."

"Please, sir, this really isn't necessary. I know everything I need to know..." Mulder began. Skinner held up his hand.

"It's been decided." He said, in a note of such finality that even Mulder knew that further arguments would be useless.

He stomped off to bed, grumbling to himself, and pulled the blanket over his head. School? At the age of 35? It was embarrassing. Humiliating. Worse than that, it would be **boring**. Sitting in desks, learning algebra and reciting spellings. His stomach clenched at the very thought. Then another thought occurred to him, and his stomach not only clenched but it did a little somersault as well. This was **not** an enlightened age, and as he recalled, schools in this era were on the strict side - corporal punishment being a favored means of maintaining discipline. Mulder groaned. He remembered being paddled once or twice by the

school principal during his youth, and it was **not** an experience he wished to repeat. That had been in the seventies though, when corporal punishment had been dying out. In this day and age it was still very much a fact of life. Mulder made a vow that he would be a model student, and not get into any trouble. Surely he'd wake up from this nightmare soon?

It was a four mile walk into town. Mulder sighed - eight miles of walking every day, followed by chores before his new "father" would even allow him to sit down to supper. How did children in this age ever reach adulthood, he wondered to himself, without dying from a combination of boredom and overwork first? No TV, or computers, no video games. In short, no fun whatsoever. Mulder was surprised to find that the concept of "fun" had a peculiar appeal to him in his 15-year-old body. When he had first woken up in this strange place, he had imagined that he was still "himself" - a 35 year old trapped inside a teenager, but the longer this nightmare went on, the more he found himself thinking, feeling, and **behaving** like a teenager. It disturbed him. It didn't help that he looked so young, of course. He had always looked younger than his years as an adult, and it was the same now. Maybe you automatically started to respond to the way people treated you - he looked like a kid, so people treated him like one, and he started behaving like one.

Mulder stole a glance at Skinner as they walked along. The man was humming to himself. Every now and again he would stop and point out some landmark or other to Mulder, or would grin as Mulder ran on ahead, eager to see what lay just beyond the next hill. Yet underneath the man's gruff but affectionate exterior, Mulder sensed some great sadness that Skinner never spoke about. He longed to find out more, but this Skinner was as close-mouthed as his counterpart in Mulder's world, and he clammed up whenever Mulder's curiosity got the better of him.

"You ask too many questions, boy," he would say, gruffly, and somehow Mulder sensed that it wouldn't be a good idea to push this man. He remembered the many occasions when he had pushed his own Skinner, in his own world, and the consequences of those actions. Skinner riled and in full "growl" mode, was not a pleasant sight.

"Here we are, Fox. I'll introduce you to the teacher." Skinner walked him into the church, which clearly doubled as the school, and Mulder fought back a sudden urge to run away as fast as his skinny legs would carry him. Skinner had a big hand on his shoulder though, and instead he found himself walking down to the front of the small building, towards a young man with dark wavy hair...Mulder stopped, dumbfounded, watching as Skinner went up to the man.

"Jeffrey - I have a new pupil for you." Skinner said.

The teacher glanced at Mulder then back at Skinner. "Walter? I've missed seeing you around. You were always one of our more conscientious parents. The school board seems incomplete without you."

"Well...maybe I'll rejoin, now that I have an interest in the school again. I seem to have acquired a foster son. His name is Fox." Skinner beckoned Mulder forward. "Fox, come here and say hello to Mr. Spender."

Mulder's legs wouldn't move, and his throat was dry.

"Mr...Spender?" He croaked. It was true - the man standing by the blackboard, looked exactly like his old adversary. "**Mr.** Spender?" he repeated incredulously, all his old animosity resurfacing. "I...can't call him that!" he exclaimed.

"No, you'll be calling him 'sir'." Skinner smiled, still beckoning. Mulder shook his head mutinously.

"I will NOT!" he said firmly. Skinner looked surprised by his vehemence. He returned to Mulder's side, took him by the arm, and led him into a corner to talk to him privately.

"Fox, Mr. Spender is our teacher and he does a good job. You'll treat him with the respect he deserves."

"He's a weasel...a ferret-faced, lying little..." Mulder got no further as Skinner's fingers dug painfully into his shoulder.

"That's enough. Now you will go up to **Mr.** Spender, shake his hand and say hello. Then you'll be polite to him, and do as he asks, and heed his lessons. Do you understand me?"

Mulder weighed up his options, as he stared into those firm, no-nonsense dark eyes.

"Yes, **sir.**" He spat at last.

"Good boy." Skinner shook his head, his grip on Mulder's shoulder loosening. "Are you remembering anything, Fox?" He asked at last, looking at Mulder keenly. Mulder shook his head. "Well then - if you have no reason for disliking Mr. Spender, I trust you'll behave yourself today. I don't want to hear that you've caused him any trouble. Is that clear?"

Mulder bit down on his immediate reply and nodded. <And you thought this nightmare couldn't get any worse> he thought to himself, as Skinner dragged him over to his new 'teacher', and Mulder shook his enemy's hand and mumbled an incoherent "hello."

"Good to have you with us, Fox." Spender said. "Why don't you take a seat over there next to Daniel."

Mulder nodded, and made his way over to a desk, taking his seat next to a red haired boy whose face was covered in freckles.

"Hi." The boy whispered. "I'm Danny."

"Yeah. Fox." Mulder glared at the boy, and then his eyes opened wide in surprise. "Pendrell?" he gasped.

"Daniel Pendrell. That's right." The short, skinny boy nodded. He wore glasses and had "victim" written all over him.

"I see you've finally found someone who can stand the smell of sitting next to you, stinky." A voice behind them said. Mulder felt desperately sorry for Pendrell as the boy flushed, and tried to ignore the taunting.

"Didn't you hear me? I was talking to you." The boy behind hissed, poking Daniel in the back with the sharp point of a pencil, making him squeal. This was too much for Mulder. He turned around angrily, and slapped away the assailant's hand, before lunging for his neck and delivering a punch to the boy's face, throwing him onto the floor and kneeling on top of him. Then he stopped, his fist still raised, and gasped:

"Krycek!" He was staring into the green eyes of his old enemy. Krycek may only have been about 14 years old, but it was clearly **him**.

Mulder didn't have a chance to say anything else, as two big hands descended on his shoulder and plucked him off.

"You've only been here two minutes and already you're in trouble." Skinner's voice boomed in his ear.

"Alex - I might have known you'd be involved in this." Spender said, pulling Krycek to his feet. Mulder glared at his adversary. Krycek was slightly smaller than he was, but he had a tough air about him.

"He started it - he jumped on me!" Krycek said accusingly, pointing at Mulder.

"You know my rules - I don't care who started it. If I catch anyone fighting you both get punished." Spender said. "Now, normally that would earn you both a good licking, but Fox is new here and doesn't know my rules, so you can both stand in the corner until you're prepared to behave in a civilized manner."

"In the corner?" Mulder gasped. "I will NOT."

"Fox." Skinner said warningly, grabbing hold of him under the arms and swinging him over to the corner before he could say another word. "What on earth has happened to you, boy?" He asked, shaking his head. "Back home you were as good as gold, but now you seem to have turned into some sort of wildcat."

"Take me back then!" Mulder pleaded. "I don't want to stay here. I'll be good if you take me home, sir. I promise."

"Fox - you'll stay here and get some schooling." Skinner told him firmly. His expression softened as he saw the misery in Mulder's eyes. "I'm sure you'll soon settle down. I expect to hear a good report from Mr. Spender when I come to pick you up."

"Yes, sir." Mulder said wretchedly. Skinner smiled and tousled his hair.

"Good boy," he said, encouragingly. Then, much to Mulder's surprise, he dropped a kiss on his forehead. Mulder felt an entirely irrational surge of joy, which soon dissipated as he

watched the big man walk out of the schoolroom, abandoning him, with Krycek making faces at him from the opposite corner. Mulder leaned his head against the wall with a groan.

<This can't be happening to me, it just can't!> he wailed silently.

Mulder wasn't sure how he got through the day. He spent an hour staring at the corner, trying to work out survival mechanisms in his head, and was grateful when he was finally allowed to return to his desk. Pendrell gave him a beaming smile which restored his spirits slightly, even if Krycek spent the rest of the day kicking the back of their bench whenever Spender wasn't looking. As for Spender, Mulder wasn't entirely sure about their so-called "teacher." He had been nice enough when Skinner was there, but as soon as the other man left, Spender reverted to the type of man Mulder remembered from his own universe. He was a bully, and he had taken an instant dislike to Mulder. In fact, Mulder was sure that only Skinner's presence in the room that morning had saved him from the licking Spender was clearly itching to hand out. The man had an unpleasant habit of wandering around the room wielding a cane, which he tapped against his palm while he was waiting for his questions to be answered. It was unnerving. Luckily, Mulder was quick-witted, much to Spender's obvious disappointment. Slower children found the cane descending on their hands if they weren't able to come up with the right answers in time. Even Krycek was caught on a couple of occasions much to Mulder's delight. By the end of the day, only Mulder and Pendrell had escaped, but Mulder's nerves were raw with tension.

It was one of the longest days of his entire life, and he was grateful when it was over. He ran outside with the other kids, and his heart jumped when he saw Skinner's large frame, resting in the shade of a tree. He loped over there, and was surprised to see Skinner's eyes light up when he saw him.

"Fox!" Skinner put an arm around his shoulder. "Well, how did your first day go?" The big man asked, as they set off home.

"Well...okay I guess." Mulder murmured, glancing at his "boss".

"Good. There - what did I tell you? Mr. Spender is a fine man, and a good teacher."

"Mmm." Mulder mumbled, wishing he could tell Skinner that Spender was not what he appeared to be. He didn't think he'd be believed though, so he just shut up and walked wearily back to the farm.

He was exhausted, but as soon as they got home, Skinner slapped him on the shoulder, and said: "Run along and do your chores, Fox. Then we can eat."

"Chores?" Mulder looked at the other man in disbelief. "Do I have to? I'm so tired..." he began. Skinner frowned.

"Chores, then supper, then homework," he said firmly.

"Homework?" Mulder closed his eyes and managed to bite back the expletive that came to his lips. "Chores, supper, homework. Fine." He repeated glumly, doing as he was told.

He almost fell asleep over supper, and only his agile brain helped him finish his homework. Skinner sat next to him, reading his newspaper and glancing over to see what Mulder was working on every few minutes. When Mulder had finished, Skinner looked over his work, and made sure he'd done everything that Spender had set for him. Mulder was too tired to express his anger and humiliation, but it settled into the pit of his stomach, waiting to explode. He couldn't wait to fall into bed, and was astonished to find that it was only 9pm.

Skinner had established a nightly ritual of saying goodnight to him as he lay in bed, but tonight he sat on the bed next to him, and ran his hand through Mulder's hair.

"You've been very quiet tonight, Fox," he murmured.

"Just tired." Mulder pulled his face away from under Skinner's hand, and the sad look in Skinner's eyes as he did so immediately made him feel guilty.

"Are you sure there isn't something bothering you?" Skinner asked.

Mulder tried to think what to say. People in this universe seemed to have similar personalities to the people he remembered back home. The Skinner he knew had always been firm, but fair, and had backed him against the smoking man on more than one occasion. Maybe it was worth a try.

"Please don't send me back to school tomorrow," he begged. "Spender...Mr. Spender...isn't what you think. When there aren't any other adults there he's cruel. He hits some of the kids."

"I'm sure he does if they deserve it." Skinner remarked.

"No. He hits them when it's not even their fault. If they're too slow, or get their sums wrong. They're really scared of him." Mulder insisted. Skinner thought about it for a moment.

"Freddie said something similar once." He frowned. "It's hard to find good teachers who are prepared to work out here, in the middle of nowhere," he told Mulder. "Unless you have a more substantial complaint than that, I won't raise this with the school board."

"But..." Mulder knew it was no use as soon as he opened his mouth. Skinner had always required proof in relation to the X Files and wasn't likely to be any different on this matter.

"I've spoken." Skinner said, in a tone that brooked no disagreement. "And you will go back to school tomorrow, Fox. I saw your work - you're clearly very clever and I'm going to make sure you get all the schooling you need in order to make something of yourself."

Mulder dragged himself back to school the next day with reluctant feet. He was so tired, and Skinner had him doing so many chores, that he had barely had time to think of a way out of his predicament. To be honest, there didn't seem to be any way out. Nobody else but him

seemed to be trapped in this weird alternative universe. He had resolved to simply go along with things for now, hoping a way out of this nightmare would soon become evident to him. In the meantime though, that meant another long day at school with the loathsome **Mr. Spender**. Mulder found he was pleased to see Pendrell waiting for him when he arrived in the school-yard. He had started dividing the people in this new world into camps of friends and enemies, and he definitely counted Pendrell in the former camp. On the other hand, having a geeky friend clearly wasn't going to do his street cred any good. As he greeted Pendrell, Krycek came up behind him, and pushed him roughly.

"Later, Fox." He grinned. "You ran off before I could get you yesterday, but you and I are going to fight this out during the lunch break today."

"Spender doesn't approve of fighting," Mulder began and he had to admit it sounded pretty lame even to his own ears. "If we get caught..."

"Oh I'm really scared." Krycek made a face, and swaggered off. Looking up, Mulder was aware that his adversary's performance had been staged at least partly for the benefit of two watching, giggling teenage girls. Both were pretty, with dark hair and big eyes.

"The Green sisters." Pendrell whispered. "Phoebe and Diana."

"What?" Mulder gasped, doing a double take and recognizing a young Phoebe Green...and Diana Fowley! "Oh shit." He sighed, as his worst fears were realized. "Ex-girlfriends - that's all I need, and me looking like this." He glanced down at his skinny adolescent body.

He couldn't get a handle on the ages of people in this universe. Skinner seemed to be the same age as he had been in his own universe, but Scully was older than either Phoebe or Diana, who had been her contemporaries, and Pendrell was about his own age. Spender was clearly of a similar age to Scully. It didn't make sense.

Mulder could hardly concentrate on his lessons all morning. He didn't know what to do about Krycek's threat to fight him in the yard during the lunch recess. A significant part of him wanted, as always, to sink his fists into Krycek's flesh and wipe the smile off of his old enemy's face, but he was also anxious not to get into any trouble with either Spender or Skinner. Lunch-time crept closer and closer, and Mulder decided that he would just ignore Krycek if he tried to make trouble. <You're 35 for god's sake. He's about 14!> he told himself, but somehow it was hard to be convinced on the subject when he was stuck in this teenage body.

"Don't fight him." Pendrell whispered as they walked into the school yard during the lunch break. "He fights dirty, Fox."

"I know." Mulder replied grimly, watching as Krycek strutted over.

"Okay, Fox, prepare to die. It's you and me." Krycek beckoned. Mulder shook his head.

"What's the matter - you chicken?" Krycek taunted. Mulder shook his head again, but his heart sank as he noticed Phoebe and Diana watching the proceedings. Some primal instinct

not to look a wimp in front of his old girlfriends took hold of him, and he felt himself bristling as Krycek went around the school-yard doing his best chicken impersonation.

"Fox, no!" Pendrell cried, but it was too late - Mulder lost control and threw himself on his old enemy, punching blindly. He got in one solid blow to Krycek's body, but then the other boy head-butted him, making him howl in anguish, momentarily blinded.

They rolled around on the floor for a moment, but Krycek soon had the upper hand and split Mulder's lip open with a vicious punch, following it up with another to the side of Mulder's face. Mulder flailed back, but he had so much less strength than he was used to in this body, and he was aware that he was losing this fight dismally. He was also aware of the crowd around them suddenly falling silent and dispersing, and then Krycek also fled, and he was left lying in the dust, blood from his split lip running down his chin. He couldn't figure out why all the kids had run off, until a hand descended on his shoulder and he blinked, looking up into Spender's angry eyes.

"Fighting again, Fox?" Spender asked.

"No. I fell." Mulder replied brazenly. Spender shook him until the teeth rattled in his head. "Don't take me a fool, boy!" Spender hissed, glancing around the school-yard. "Who were you fighting with?"

"Nobody." Mulder mumbled, some ancient schoolboy instinct about not ratting on other kids kicking in, even if the kid in question **was** Alex Krycek.

"Tell me!" Spender shook him again.

"Nobody." Mulder repeated mutinously, and he saw the anger flare in Spender's eyes at being so openly defied.

"Fine. Then I'll make you." Spender growled. "Lunch recess is over," he called. "I want everyone inside - now!" He took hold of Mulder's arm, and propelled him into the schoolroom, standing him by his desk. When all the other kids were seated, Spender turned his attention back to Mulder.

"It would seem that there was a fight. I want the other boy involved to own up, or Fox here will take his punishment for him." Spender said. Nobody moved. Mulder glared meaningfully at Krycek, but the other boy refused to meet his eye. As Krycek had no visible signs of injury on him, there was nothing else to give him away. "Fine." Spender picked up his cane, and Mulder shuddered. "Hands out, Fox." Spender said. Mulder glared at him, his mind working overtime as he examined his options, but he couldn't think of a single way out of this mess. Finally, slowly and reluctantly, he opened his palms and offered them up. Tears sprang unbidden into his eyes as the first blow struck home. Mulder couldn't believe how much the cane stung. He bit on his lip to stop himself crying out and thoroughly humiliating himself in front of the whole class.

"Who was the other boy?" Spender asked, rapping down several blows in quick succession.

"I don't know." Mulder said, glaring at Spender.

"Then we'll just have to keep going, won't we?" Spender gave him a malicious smile.

The caning soon turned into a battle of wills. Mulder had no intention of naming names, and Spender had no intention of giving up. Soon, Mulder's hands were covered in red welts, and he could hardly stop himself from sobbing out loud as each blow landed. What was worse was the feeling that Spender seemed to have totally lost it, as he laid into Mulder, raising the cane over and over again. Mulder felt as if the room was a haze of pain, and silent, watching eyes - Krycek's green ones, Diana's brown ones, Daniel's blue ones...all watching, aghast and shocked by the contest they were witnessing. Mulder felt as if he were spinning off into space, the pain truly more than he could bear, when he suddenly heard someone speak.

"Sir...please..." It sounded like the voice of sanity, and it seemed to wake Spender up from his frenzy. His eyes snapped back into focus, and took in Mulder's swaying frame, and the sweat pouring from his forehead. Mulder looked around the room, trying to locate the owner of the voice, and his eyes fell on Pendrell. He gave the other boy a weak smile of thanks.

"Very well." Spender ran a hand through his wavy hair, clearly annoyed by the way he had lost control. "Take your seat, Fox." He gestured with his head, and Mulder slipped back to his desk. His hands felt as if they were on fire, and when he glanced at them he could see the raised welts. He couldn't even move his fingers to write, and he sat there for the rest of the day, just staring into space. Luckily Spender left him alone.

As soon as school ended, he ran out of the door, ignoring Krycek's green-eyed stare, and Pendrell's plaintive "Fox...wait!" He took off, running over the hill and through the wood, along a wagon trail, running and running as he always used to back in his own universe, whenever he was upset. He finally came to a halt, and sat under a tree overlooking Skinner's farm, watching as his surrogate father worked in the fields. He longed to go down, to have something to eat and drink, but a part of him was scared about what his reception would be. Skinner was pretty strict, and for all Mulder knew, he might end up on the receiving end of another thrashing.

He sat there for a long time, watching as Skinner saw to the stock, and returned to the house. The big man came to the door several times, looking out, wiping his hands on a cloth, clearly worried. Finally, Mulder couldn't bear it any longer. He had to face the music. With a slow, reluctant stride, he walked down the hill, and along the path towards the place he had come to view as his home. The door opened, and Skinner appeared.

"Fox." The big man strode out to greet him. "It's late... I was worried..." Skinner stopped short, taking in Mulder's disheveled appearance, his split lip and bruised cheek. "Well..." He ran a gentle, assessing finger over Mulder's cheek. "I've seen worse. Come on, let's get you cleaned up."

Mulder almost sobbed with relief as Skinner took him into the house, and sat him down, bringing a bowl of water to clean up the wounds, then standing back and shaking his head at him. "I take it the other boy won?" Skinner asked. Mulder nodded, silently. Skinner chuckled and tousled Mulder's hair. "There, all done. Why don't you set the table and I'll serve up. Supper's ready." Mulder nodded again, accepting the wooden plates that Skinner handed to him, and then immediately dropping them with a yelp of pain. "Fox?" Skinner asked, concerned. Mulder looked down at his feet, hardly able to bring himself to look at Skinner as the other man took hold of his hands and turned them over, then sucked in a sharp intake of breath. "I take it you were caught then?" Skinner asked. Mulder nodded again, fearing a lecture, or worse, but instead Skinner brought over a bowl of clean, cold water and placed it on the table in front of him.

"It'll sting a bit, but the best way is just to dunk them straight in." Skinner told him, gesturing. Mulder looked up, finally daring to meet the man's eyes, and found them kind and sympathetic.

"Aren't you angry?" He whispered.

"With you?" Skinner asked. "No. Show me a teenage boy who hasn't been in a fight." The set of his jaw made it clear that he was angry with someone though. "Did Mr. Spender whip the other boy as hard as he whipped you?" Skinner wanted to know. Mulder shook his head.

"I wouldn't tell him who it was. He went crazy. He wouldn't stop hitting me," he whispered. Skinner looked even angrier now.

"Rules are rules, and you knew what the penalty for fighting was," he murmured, "but I don't approve of anything like **this**." He gestured at Mulder's swollen fingers. "The punishment seems to have greatly exceeded the crime. Come on, get it over with and then I'll put some salve on them," he said.

Mulder nodded and took a deep breath, before plunging his hands into the cold water, gasping as it made contact with his sore flesh.

"Good boy." Skinner tousled his hair in a way that Mulder was starting to like, and went to get a towel. He wrapped Mulder's hands gently in the towel, and patted them dry, then he carefully smoothed the salve over the raw welts and blisters. "I'll be having a word with Mr. Spender tomorrow," he said grimly. "A licking's one thing, but this goes a long way beyond that. You're a brave boy, Fox, to take this, and stick by your own code of honor. I'm proud of you." Mulder felt something inside him snap, and the tears rose up in his eyes. He found himself choking, and then he was enveloped in a pair of strong arms and pulled into an embrace. Skinner held him for several long minutes until his sobbing had subsided, then pushed him back into his chair.

"A good meal, and then straight to bed." He smiled. "You'll feel better with something in your belly, and I've always found a good night's sleep helps to put things into perspective. Tomorrow evening I want you to come home straight from school."

"Why?" Mulder glanced up, wondering if this was Skinner's way of punishing him for getting into the fight.

"I'm going to teach you how to use your fists." Skinner grinned. "If you get into trouble for it, that'll be your own look-out, and I won't have any sympathy for you, but at least you should know how to defend yourself, so we don't have a repeat of this." His gentle fingers brushed against the bruises on Mulder's face.

"You'll teach me?" Mulder looked at Skinner's burly frame, and silently conceded that the man would undoubtedly make a good teacher on the subject.

"Yes. You're skinny, but the secret of being a good boxer is to use your brain and make the most of whatever brawn you have, however much or little that may be. I used to do a great deal of boxing in my youth, so I know what I'm talking about." He smiled. "You deserve a fighting chance, Fox," he said, nodding, "and that's what I'm going to give you."

Mulder went to bed that night feeling happier than he would have thought possible after such a nightmare of a day. He went to sleep instantly, and therefore didn't see Skinner sit down next to him and gently stroke his hair, watching over him as he slept.

Mulder didn't know what Skinner said to Spender, but from that moment on, the teacher didn't lay a finger on him. He seemed almost wary of asking him any questions in class, and his school life eased considerably as a result. Krycek stayed away from him for a few weeks as well, although he didn't have the grace to thank him for keeping silent about who he'd been fighting.

Mulder found that he enjoyed Skinner's tutorials. The other man was an excellent teacher, and they spent several evenings stripped to the waist, sparring together in the barn, until Skinner was finally convinced that Mulder would be able to hold his own. Although Krycek hadn't challenged him since that day, he knew it wouldn't last - the animosity between them still simmered under the surface and it wasn't long before it resurfaced. Krycek still teased Pendrell, and Mulder stood up for his friend, inevitably causing hostility. He wasn't surprised to find Krycek waiting for him in the school-yard one evening after school.

"I think we should settle things once and for all," Krycek told him. Mulder stared at the other boy, coolly. "Just because you didn't dump me in it with Spender, doesn't mean I'm going to let you get away." Krycek insisted. "Unless you're chicken?"

"You are so unoriginal." Mulder sighed. "All right - I'll fight you, but not here. I'm not having Spender lay into me again."

"Where then?" Krycek's green eyes glowed eagerly.

"The woods." Mulder said. Krycek looked slightly disappointed that there wouldn't be any witnesses to his victory, and that the girls wouldn't see him beat Mulder to a pulp, but he was too keyed up at the prospect of a fight to protest.

"I'll come." Pendrell said. Mulder glanced at him in surprise. Pendrell's father was a strict man, and Pendrell was under orders to come straight home from school every night. Mulder knew that his friend was terrified of his father and didn't dare to disobey him. "You're fighting him because you stick up for me." Pendrell said with a shrug. "I won't let you do it alone. I'm not much good as a fighter, but I'll hold your jacket, and I'll be on your side," he said firmly. Mulder felt a wave of affection for his friend for this show of courage and smiled his thanks. Having met Pendrell's strange, distant father, he was sure that the boy would get into trouble, so he appreciated Pendrell's support.

They were barely in the woods, when Krycek suddenly turned and charged at Mulder without warning. Mulder was momentarily startled, but he soon remembered Skinner's lessons, and before long he had the upper hand over the surprised Krycek, who had assumed that he would have as easy a victory as before. Mulder pinned the other boy to the ground and pummeled at him relentlessly until finally Krycek gave in, sobbing and whimpering, begging Mulder to stop. Mulder paused, enjoying his victory.

"Apologize to Daniel," he insisted.

"Sorry, Daniel." Krycek mumbled.

"Louder." Mulder slapped Krycek's face.

"SORRY DANIEL!" Krycek yelled.

"And promise never to tease him or be cruel to him again."

"I promise." Krycek said, tears of humiliation mingling with the blood that was running freely from his nose.

"I don't want you bothering me again, either." Mulder slapped his old foe across the cheek.

"I won't." Krycek whispered.

"Good. Then we're even." Mulder got up, and retrieved his jacket from Pendrell, and they both left without looking back.

"Thank you." Pendrell said in a soft voice. "It was worth...you know...to see this. You're a good friend, Fox." Then he ran off, speeding as fast as his legs could carry him. Mulder watched him go and smiled, whistling to himself as he walked back to the farm. Maybe this universe wasn't all bad, he thought to himself. He was getting used to it, and the fight with Krycek had reminded him of old times, of going to work in the... He stopped suddenly, trying to remember the name of the place where he had worked in his old life. "FNI...no FBI...and the...a building beginning with 'h'." Mulder frowned, trying to remember, wondering when the facts stored in his memory had started to slip away. Finally, he gave up, and continued home.

Skinner was unsaddling his mare as Mulder strode up the path. He stopped what he was doing and watched his young charge for a while, smiling.

"I take it you won then?" He commented.

"How did you know?" Mulder demanded incredulously. "How did you know I'd even fight him today?"

"I didn't." Skinner grinned, catching Mulder's hand and glancing at the grazed knuckles, "but you walked up that path like a victor this evening."

"It was fantastic." Mulder smiled. "I don't think he'll trouble me again."

"Good." Skinner tousled his hair, and handed him the saddle. "Here, take this inside for me."

"Sure." Mulder said, walking towards the stable, still grinning. Then he stopped and looked back. "I...I want to say thanks," he muttered.

Skinner waved a hand at him. "Idiot!" he grinned. "I'm just glad you proved yourself. I think this calls for a celebration don't you? I'll make your favorite supper, and you can stay up late tonight. Doctor Scully dropped by with some newspapers and magazines - they're pretty out of date, but you could read through them if you want."

"Excellent." Mulder punched the air with his fist, and took the saddle into the barn. Then he stopped, wondering when the prospect of reading a pile of old newspapers had become so attractive. <I suppose you just get used to a different way of life> he sighed to himself. A different pace of life too, different expectations.

Life out here was hard, and it was a daily struggle making ends meet. He knew Skinner didn't have much money - the man made extra by carving furniture for people in the town - and there were times when Mulder saw the look of worry on Skinner's face as he counted the meager quantity of cash he kept in a jar on the mantle shelf. Mulder had also noticed that although Skinner's boots were falling apart, he had bought Mulder a new pair first, when his had started letting in water. There wasn't enough money for two pairs of boots. "Maybe after the harvest." Skinner had told him with a wry smile, stitching the sole of his own boots back up again for the fourth or fifth time. "It looks good this year, so we should make enough to see us through for awhile." Mulder had become acutely aware of how different this age was from the throwaway society he was used to living in, and he admired Skinner for his sturdy self-reliance.

Mulder still hadn't worked out what had happened to Skinner's family - and it wasn't a subject he dared pursue - but he was surprised to find out how much the other man had come to mean to him. He was honest, dependable and fair. He might occasionally lecture Mulder, and often nagged him about chores and homework, but despite that, Mulder knew that deep down inside, he had come to feel a very strong affection for this surrogate "father" he had acquired. Skinner's good opinion mattered to him, and he was delighted that his one-time boss took such pleasure in his victory over Krycek.

Mulder was astonished to find Krycek waiting for him on the path leading to the school the next day. The other boy didn't say a word. He just fell into step beside Mulder and they walked up to the school together without talking. He did the same on the way home,

waiting and then falling into step beside Mulder. This went on for several days, until Krycek suggested that they went fishing.

"I don't know." Mulder paused, thinking about it.

"I've got a fishing rod and line. I keep them by the stream." Krycek urged.

"I'm expected back home. There are chores..." Mulder hesitated. He hated doing his chores, and the idea of going fishing was appealing. Krycek grinned at him, and then started to run in the direction of the stream, and somehow Mulder couldn't stop himself following on after.

They didn't catch anything - Krycek's home-made fishing rod was somewhat inadequate for the task, but, lying in the evening sun, up to his knees in water, Mulder found himself enjoying the other boy's company. He soon found out that Krycek was the only son of a gypsy family camped on the plains. He had eight sisters, but being a boy, Krycek was the only one of the children to be sent to school.

"So you don't have any chores to do?" Mulder sighed.

"Nope." Krycek grinned. "Just tell your dad you don't want to do them."

"I don't think so." Mulder choked with laughter at the very thought.

"Why not?" Krycek asked, his tone curious.

"You've met my dad haven't you?" Mulder pointed out, wondering idly when he had started to think of Skinner as being his "dad".

"Yeah." Krycek grinned. "Yeah. I suppose. I can see why you might be a bit scared of him."

"Oh, he's okay." Mulder shrugged.

"Your cheesy feet are scaring the fish away." Krycek said.

"So are yours." Mulder pointed out. Somehow, and he wasn't sure how, the friendly squabble became a mock fight, and then they both fell into the water.

Mulder arrived home an hour later, soaked through, and feeling slightly uneasy about how Skinner would react - both to the lateness of the hour, and the state of his clothing. He opened the door, and stood there for a moment, dripping onto the floor. Skinner glanced up from his seat by the fire, and raised an eyebrow.

"Fishing I presume?" He asked.

"Um, yeah." Mulder grinned.

"Well your chores are still waiting for you, and your homework still has to be done." Skinner stated implacably turning back to his paper. Mulder sighed theatrically. "Any arguments?" Skinner asked ominously.

"No, sir. None." Mulder said quickly, turning to go and see to his chores.

"Fox?" Skinner called him back. "Did you catch anything?"

"No." Mulder sighed. "Alex said..."

"Alex?" Skinner frowned. "Since when has he been your friend?"

"I don't know. Since the fight." Mulder shrugged.

"Well, he's a bad kid, Fox. His family let him run wild. What's happened to Daniel? I thought he was your friend?"

"He is, but he has to go straight home after school. I can have more than one friend can't I?" Mulder said defensively.

"Of course." Skinner shrugged. "Just don't let Alex Krycek get you into any trouble."

"I won't!" Mulder flared.

"I mean it." Skinner said firmly. Mulder glared at him for a moment, then turned on his heel and walked out into the yard, muttering to himself.

The following weekend was the 4th of July celebrations in town. Skinner opened up the wooden trunk at the bottom of Mulder's bed and found him a new set of clothes to wear.

"Did these belong to Freddie?" Mulder asked.

"No, to Ben." Skinner smiled. "You've worn holes in all Freddie's clothes now. Ben's were far too big for you, but I've had Mrs. Scully take them up."

"How long has it been?" Mulder asked.

"Since I found you? Six months." Skinner smiled. "You still don't remember anything of your previous life do you?" He asked gently. Mulder shook his head.

<Less and less> he thought to himself.

"Tell me about Ben," he asked as they drove the wagon into town, not expecting a reply.

"Ben was the quiet one. Not like you." Skinner grinned at him. "Freddie was bright as a button, inquisitive, always into everything, always getting into trouble - but Ben was studious. He liked to read. You're a bit like him in that respect. Ben was clever - I hoped he'd become a doctor. He was bright enough to win a scholarship. I couldn't have afforded to put

him through college myself." He looked sad for a moment, and Mulder wondered if that would signal the end of the conversation. He had found out only snatches about Skinner's family, and he still didn't know what had happened to them or where they lived now. "Ben had light hair, blue eyes. He didn't look a bit like me - he took after Sharon." Skinner had never mentioned his wife's name before and Mulder looked up, startled. "Freddie looked like me. Cassie was too small to look like anyone." Skinner smiled fondly. "She had big chubby baby cheeks, and she was bald like me." He gave a wry grin, shaking his head at the memory.

"What happened to them?" Mulder asked, but at that moment they drew up into town, and Skinner jumped out of the wagon and started to unhitch the horse. Mulder sighed. He had never been so close to finding out about the mysterious Skinner family before. Now he had names for all of them - Ben, the eldest son, Freddie, a few years younger, and baby Cassie.

He soon forgot about the Skinner family, as Krycek and Pendrell both found him and he ran off, caught up in the excitement of the celebrations. He glowed with pride when Skinner won the wrestling competition, but the highlight of the event was the evening, when the fireworks were set off. Phoebe and Diana both pretended to be scared by all the loud bangs, and that was an excuse for the boys to comfort them, making the most of the opportunity to hold hands and steal sly kisses.

"They're so pretty." Diana sighed. "I wish we could have fireworks every day."

"You could. They're not very difficult to make." Pendrell commented.

"I bet **you** couldn't make them." Krycek said scornfully.

"I bet I could." Pendrell flared.

"We could put on our own display for you then." Mulder said, enjoying being able to squeeze up close to the girls, and put his arms around their waists.

"Yeah!" Krycek grinned. "Let's do it."

"I don't think that would be a good idea." Pendrell muttered nervously.

"Why not? You just said you could." Krycek pointed out.

"Yes, but I didn't say I **would**." Pendrell countered.

"I'd love to have our own fireworks display, just for us." Phoebe sighed, nestling closer to Pendrell. He licked his lips, looking worried.

"We'll do it." Krycek said. "Tomorrow evening. We'll come to your house, hide behind the storage outhouse, and set the fireworks going. It'll be dark. We'll run away before anyone can catch us."

"Oh yes." Diana smiled. "Will you do that for us?" She asked Mulder.

"Well..." he hesitated, then broke into a grin. "Okay," he said, elbowing Pendrell in the ribs. "We'll be there."

"That was the best day of my life." Mulder sighed, as he climbed into the wagon, beside Skinner later that evening.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself." Skinner's teeth gleamed in the darkness as he smiled at his young charge.

"So nice..." Mulder murmured, yawning, his head lolling against Skinner's shoulder as he fell asleep. Skinner smiled to himself, and arranged the rug around Mulder. The boy still hadn't woken up when they reached the farm, so he plucked him out of the wagon, and carried him into the house, laying him down on the bed and tucking the blankets around him.

"Sleep well, Fox." Skinner kissed the sleeping boy's forehead. "Thank you for coming here and bringing some joy back into my life."

Mulder awoke the next day feeling vaguely apprehensive. Then he remembered the deal they'd made about the fireworks the previous evening. Something told him that this was **not** a good idea, but he pushed his niggling worries to the back of his mind. It was Sunday, and when he'd done his chores he was free to do as he pleased. Skinner was not a religious man, and, unusually for this era Mulder thought, he didn't go to church. Mulder met up with Krycek and Pendrell later on that afternoon. Pendrell had a box of supplies with him, but he didn't look very happy.

"I don't think we should go through with this," he said.

"Don't be stupid - the girls will think we're the best if we pull this off." Krycek told him.

"But..."

"No buts." Mulder said firmly. "We're going to do it."

They arranged to meet up after dark, and Mulder made his excuses to Skinner after supper and slipped off to bed early. He felt slightly guilty, but he reasoned that he could slip out while Skinner was reading in front of the fire, as he usually did, and slip back in again after Skinner had gone to bed. The other man wouldn't even notice that he was missing. There was no reason why he would ever find out.

He managed to slip out easily enough. Skinner had nodded off, which made it even easier. Mulder met up with the other boys as arranged, and they hid in the yard behind the storage outhouse at the Green house. Krycek threw a stone at an upstairs window and Diana appeared, waving to them.

"Get on with it." Krycek hissed, and Pendrell opened the box with fumbling fingers, mixing together the powders he had begged, borrowed, and stolen from various sources over the years, to feed his obsession with all things chemical. Mulder held the fuse wire, and Pendrell handed Krycek the taper, lit from the lantern they had brought with them.

"You do it," he squeaked.

Krycek grinned, and lit the wire, and there was a whooshing sound. The home-made firework exploded into the air, fizzled around crazily for a while, then nose-dived into the window of the outhouse, breaking a pane of glass, and exploding around the storage area with a series of ear splitting screeches and crackles that would have woken the dead. A moment later, there was a loud bang, and a plume of smoke emerged from the outhouse.

"It's on fire!" Mulder yelled, getting up and starting to run. He didn't get very far as pandemonium broke out. Mr. Green emerged from the house, with his wife close behind him, and several neighbors had run into the yard with buckets of water, seeking to put out the flames. Mulder found himself caught up in a pair of strong arms as he tried to flee. Krycek and Pendrell hadn't fared any better - and soon all three boys were deposited by the house with the local blacksmith standing guard over them. Pendrell was white with terror.

"Oh god!" He whispered. "What have we done? What will my father say?"

Krycek simply shrugged his shoulders, but Mulder was feeling pretty uneasy himself. He had no idea what Skinner's reaction to this piece of mischief would be, and he didn't look forward to finding out.

By the time the flames had been extinguished, and the neighborhood had returned to bed, Mulder, Pendrell and Krycek had been forced to recount the entire story to Mr. Green who had sent for their parents. Mulder quaked as he saw the grim expression on Skinner's face. Skinner put a hand on his shoulder and looked him over, wiping some soot from his forehead.

"Are you all right, Fox?" He asked.

"Yes, sir." Mulder couldn't meet his eye.

"Good." Skinner nodded. "Now perhaps someone will tell me exactly what went on here?"

At that moment Pendrell's father put in an appearance. He rushed up to his son and delivered a stinging blow to his ear. Mulder bit on his lip, and Skinner's hand tightened on his shoulder.

"You'll suffer for this." Pendrell's father hissed, hitting him again. Glancing up, Mulder saw Skinner shaking his head.

"Take the boy home, Jonathan," Skinner said, interrupting Mr. Pendrell in the process of delivering another blow. The other man looked up.

"He's my son, Walter. I'll treat him as I think he deserves," he growled. "You'd be better off seeing to that foundling you've got there. I'll bet he and the gypsy boy are behind this. Daniel would never dream up anything like this by himself." Mulder bit guiltily on his bottom lip. That was a true enough assessment of the situation.

Krycek's father rolled up at that moment, smelling suspiciously of drink. He gave Alex a lazy grin and beckoned him over.

"C'mon, son. The womenfolk are all clucking around about this. You'd best get home and entertain them with the whole story."

"It certainly isn't an entertaining story." Mr. Green bristled, recounting what had happened. Mulder glanced up to see how Skinner was taking it, and then wished he hadn't.

"I'm out of pocket and I expect you to pay for the damage your sons have caused," Mr. Green insisted. Mulder winced, knowing how little money Skinner actually possessed.

"We'll certainly pay. Of course." Mr. Pendrell blustered.

"Well I won't." Krycek's father smiled. "I haven't a cent to my name, as you well know, Green, so you can whistle for your cash." He made off down the street, lurching from side to side. Alex gave Mulder a wink, then set off after him. Mulder saw Skinner frowning and guessed that he didn't approve of Krycek's father any more than he approved of Pendrell's.

"I'll work off the debt, Nathaniel." Skinner told Mr. Green earnestly. "I promise."

"Well, your word is good enough for me, Walter." The other man said, nodding curtly. "Now take your sons home. I don't want them coming near this house ever again."

Skinner walked Mulder out to the wagon, and they started the drive back to the farm in silence. Mulder was shivering, and it had nothing to do with the cold. He wondered just how angry Skinner was, and what he intended to do with him. After a little while, Skinner cleared his throat.

"I have one question, Fox," he said.

"Yes, sir." Mulder nodded.

"The story Mr. Green told us back there - is it true? Or do you have some defense for your actions this evening?"

"I..." Mulder racked his brain for some adequate defense, but failed to come up with anything. "It's true, sir," he said finally.

"You're sure?" Skinner sounded faintly despairing, and Mulder felt a moment of dread, wondering if Skinner would throw him out, and then wondering where he'd go if he did. "I'm giving you a chance to defend yourself here, Fox." Skinner said quietly.

"Yes, sir, I know," Mulder replied, "but it was pretty much as Mr. Green explained it, sir."

"I see." Skinner lapsed into silence again, and Mulder sat frozen to his wagon seat. He was sure that agonizing journey lasted for a lifetime. He stole little glances at Skinner every now

and again, but the man's face was set in granite, and he looked more angry than Mulder could ever remember seeing him.

They finally drew up at the farm, and Skinner got off the wagon and went to unhitch the horse.

"Fox, I want you to go and wait for me in the barn," he said quietly.

"In the barn?" Mulder clambered down from the wagon, and looked at Skinner in confusion. "What's going to happen, sir?"

"I'm going to whip you." Skinner told him. "Now go and wait for me in the barn. I'll see to the horse, and then I'll be along."

Mulder's stomach did several flips, but he didn't dare disobey Skinner when he was so silently furious. With quaking footsteps, Mulder began the walk down to the barn, letting himself in, and hanging up the lantern on the nail on the wall. He paced around the barn nervously, wondering what exactly Skinner meant when he referred to a whipping. Skinner's anger scared him, just as it always had before - back in that other world that he could hardly remember. He briefly considered making a run for it, but where would he go? He didn't want to leave this place that he had come to think of as his home. Apart from anything else, a nagging voice at the back of his head told Mulder that he was only going to get exactly what he deserved. All the same, his whole body shook as he thought of being on the receiving end of a whipping from Skinner. Somehow he knew that this wouldn't be like the caning Spender had given him. This would be worse, much worse, and the fact that it was **Skinner** who would be handing it out made it doubly so. Mulder could barely admit to himself how much he had come to like his old boss during the time that he had lived with him, and it hurt him deep inside to think that this kindly, patient man, would shortly administer a whipping to him.

The barn door clattered open all too soon for Mulder's liking, breaking into his panic-stricken thoughts, and he looked up into Skinner's dark, angry eyes.

"All right, Fox, come here." Skinner said softly, and Mulder obeyed instantly, his heart and stomach exchanging places, then flip-flopping back again. Skinner put his hands on Mulder's shoulders and turned him around, pushing him towards the hay bales stacked on the barn floor. "Pants down, Fox, and bend over the bales," Skinner instructed. Mulder unfastened his pants with quivering fingers, and pushed them down to his knees. Then he arranged himself over the bale, feeling the straw scratch against his bare flesh. Skinner tugged down his shorts and Mulder buried his head in his arms, feeling horribly exposed.

Skinner unbuckled his belt, and wound it around his hand, then placed the other hand in the small of Mulder's back. He put one of his feet on a bale of straw to gain some purchase, and Mulder tensed.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Fox." Skinner said, bringing the belt down hard on Mulder's waiting backside. Mulder gasped out loud from the sting of the blow.

"I'm sorry..." he whispered.

"I know you are, son, but you still have to be punished." Skinner delivered another stinging blow, and Mulder jumped.

"Ow..." he wailed, hating himself for crying out loud.

"What on earth possessed you to carry out such a stupid prank?" Skinner demanded, landing two more licks in quick succession.

"I don't know. We wanted to impress the girls...Unnnhhhh. Owwwww! " Mulder sobbed.

"I'm sure that you 'impressed' the entire neighborhood." Skinner told him, the belt rising and falling again, and again. Mulder pressed his face into the straw, willing the torment to stop. It was humiliating to be here, in this position, receiving a whipping like the 15-year-old that everyone thought he was, but more than anything else he hated the fact that Skinner was so disappointed in him. He was also really worried about where Skinner would find the money to pay for the damage that they had caused.

"I'm so sorry...owwwwww." He yelled again. Another lick caught him a stinging blow across the top of his thighs, and he tried to get up, bellowing his distress. Skinner's hand caught him up and pinned him back down again, as another two licks were laid across his now burning butt.

"You could have been hurt." Skinner laid a particularly hard swat across his backside. "Or you could have hurt someone else. Playing around with explosives - it's stupid and dangerous and you deserve a hard whipping for your part in it."

"I know. Owwwww. Unnnnnnh...please..." he sobbed.

"I'm not sure that you understand just how foolhardy that was. I hope this whipping **makes** you understand, Fox." Skinner paused for a moment and then went to work even harder. Mulder couldn't stop himself wriggling under the onslaught, but Skinner's hand was firm on his back and there was no escape. Finally the floodgates opened, and Mulder cried his heart out, barely noticing the two further licks that Skinner delivered. He just lay there, sobbing, and after a few minutes, he was suddenly aware that the whipping had stopped. He glanced up at Skinner through tear-filled eyes, watching as the other man buckled his belt back on.

"I'll give you a few moments to collect yourself," Skinner told him. "Then I want you to come back to the house. We have some talking to do - and you look like you need a good wash as well." He observed, as soot and tear-stains had combined to give Mulder a distinctly murky appearance.

"Yes...sir..." Mulder gulped, easing himself off from the hay bale, and glancing over his shoulder to survey the damage. He had several large red lines across his backside, and he knew without touching them that they'd hurt like hell if he tried to sit down. Still hiccuping, he carefully pulled his pants back up, and then leaned against the side of the barn, until his breathing had slowed down. What would Skinner do next, he wondered? The man still

seemed angry, and Mulder dreaded that he'd get to the house and Skinner would order him to leave. Why not? He had no obligation to Mulder. In fact, Mulder was just a drain on his resources, a mouth to feed when he had little enough money to see to his own needs.

Mulder walked slowly back to the tiny house, every step reminding him of the punishment he had undergone, and he pushed open the door. Skinner was sitting in his usual spot by the fire, a bottle of whisky in his hand. Mulder felt an old, semi-remembered fear leap into his mind.

"I guess I've driven you to drink," he whispered, wiping his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Nearly." Skinner held up the unopened bottle, "but not quite. I promised Sharon I'd never touch this stuff again and I've kept that promise. How are you?"

Mulder glanced up, surprised, but found only genuine concern in Skinner's eyes.

"I hurt," he replied honestly.

"Yes. I expect that you do." Skinner nodded. "Come here." He pointed to a spot by the fire and Mulder walked over, wondering what to expect next. He didn't expect what happened, which was that Skinner enveloped him in a hug and kissed his forehead. "You really are a mess." Skinner said fondly, wiping a streak of salty soot from Mulder's face.

"I'm sorry..." Mulder felt the tears welling up again. He could have coped with Skinner's anger, but this affection and concern was too much for him. He broke into heaving sobs and burrowed his head in Skinner's shoulder. The big man's hands drew comforting circles on his back.

"It's all right." Skinner murmured. "I'm sorry too. I hated having to whip you so harshly, Fox. I know you're not a bad boy, but that doesn't mean you don't have a lot to learn. It's been a long time since I took my belt off to my sons, and it's not something I do lightly. I'd rather we didn't have to go through this again." Mulder's sobs started to tail off, and he looked up.

"Again? You mean you're not throwing me out?"

"What?" Skinner sounded aghast. "Of course not! I'm sure I got up to worse pranks in my time." He grinned. "I wouldn't throw you out for anything, Fox. Having you around has given me someone to live for again. You belong here, with me."

"You're sure? I take up space, and eat too much, and you couldn't afford those boots because of me, and now it's even worse because you have to pay back Mr. Green..." Mulder started to cry again.

"Ssh!" Skinner laughed. "I'm not saying I'm not angry about what you did tonight - but more than anything I'm sad that you deceived me. Slipping out of the house like that."

"I know." Mulder nodded.

"I'll find the money somehow. You can help by taking on more work around the farm, while I make more furniture. I'm sure we'll get by. Now - I'll warm you some milk while you go outside and wash yourself down."

Mulder nodded and made for the door.

"Fox." Skinner stopped him, and Mulder looked back, questioningly. "You've been punished. As far as I'm concerned that's where the matter ends," he said firmly. Mulder nodded again, a feeling of relief washing over him.

When he returned to the house Skinner nodded him towards the bed, and then brought over the warm milk while Mulder eased himself cautiously under the sheets on his stomach, wincing as he did so.

"You can't drink lying down like that." Skinner commented reasonably.

"I can't sit up." Mulder complained.

"Of course you can." Skinner waited patiently, while Mulder eased himself gingerly into a painful seated position in order to take his drink. "Did your real father never have cause to whip you?" Skinner asked, sitting down on the side of the bed.

"No - he used to get drunk and lash out. He cut my head open once. He scared me." Mulder said, then looked up in a panic, realizing that Skinner had caught him out.

"So you do remember him?" Skinner asked gently.

"Yes. I remember flashes." Mulder frowned. "It really is only flashes..." he said, suddenly realizing that had become the truth.

"Maybe you ran away from him because he drank and used to harm you." Skinner suggested, looking at Mulder keenly.

"No. I don't think that's it." Mulder said.

Skinner studied his own fingers for a while. "I used to drink myself," he confided, taking a deep breath, and then looking Mulder in the eye. Mulder gripped the mug he was holding tightly. This was clearly something that Skinner was deeply ashamed of. Mulder wondered if that was why Sharon and the children had left.

"I..." Skinner paused, as if mustering the courage to complete this confession. "It was hard when we first came here," he said, and Mulder felt a wave of pity for the man. "I worked all the hours god sent...but still, it was hard keeping my family fed and clothed. I started drinking to blot out the worries. I didn't realize how bad it was until I lost my temper one night. It only happened once." He looked up, and Mulder was surprised at how guilty his eyes were. "Once is enough though." Skinner shrugged. "My family were terrified. I'm too big to throw my weight around - I could have hurt them. I can still remember the look of terror in my son's eyes. I don't ever want to see that look again. I haven't touched a drop

since then, not even when..." he broke off, buried his face in his hands for a second, and then looked back at Mulder. "I just wanted to reassure you. I'm not like your father. I won't get drunk and harm you. I promise."

"You were holding that whisky bottle tonight." Mulder blurted. "I drove you to that. You might want to change your mind about having me around."

"I wasn't considering drinking it because you drove me to it!" Skinner laughed. "I wasn't seriously considering drinking it at all. I was just miserable because I'd had to punish you. I didn't like seeing you cry. I've come to love you as if you were my own son, Fox, and I want to do right by you."

He smiled and took the empty mug from Mulder's nerveless fingers. "Good night. Sleep well." He kissed Mulder's hair and left, taking the lamp with him. Mulder stared after him, his mind reeling from the events of the night. Then he closed his eyes and cried himself softly to sleep, not because of the pain in his backside, but because Skinner had said that he loved him.

End of part one

Part Two: The Gathering by Xanthe

Author's Notes:

Mulder struggles to come to terms with his new life, and his place in Skinner's affections.

Posted: 17th June, 1999

A big thank you to Phoebe for providing so much factual information, and Cadillac Red and Alleycat for beta reading.

Mulder crouched beside Skinner, helping the big man as he carved an intricate pattern into the oak table he was working on. Mulder handed him tools, and watched as Skinner applied the finishing touches to the last acorn he was carving, then stood back and surveyed his work with a smile.

"All done." Skinner grinned at his helper. "This should bring us in a tidy sum. It's a fine piece of work if I do say so myself."

Mulder nodded, but he couldn't smile. Skinner was busy enough as it was, working the farm, without taking on all this extra work in the evening, making and carving wooden furniture. It had been several weeks since Mulder had earned himself a whipping after the disastrous incident with the fireworks, but Skinner was still trying to pay off the debt he owed because

of it. Mulder fought down the feeling of guilt, and busied himself clearing up the woodshed, tidying away the tools. He had been coming home straight from school in order to help Skinner, and he missed his fishing trips with Alex, and his resentment over that warred with his guilt over being responsible for this mess in the first place.

"Something up?" Skinner glanced at the quiet boy. Mulder usually ran about, keeping up a non-stop chatter that Skinner would listen to with half an ear, and a smile.

"No." Mulder scuffed a foot through the sawdust.

"Yes there is." Skinner looked at him searchingly.

"How long do you think it'll be?" Mulder asked.

"Until what?" Skinner finished rubbing down his handiwork, and wiped his hands on a rag. He held the shed door open for Mulder, and they both walked back to the house.

"Until we've paid off Mr. Green." Mulder mumbled, hating to bring up the subject of that terrible night.

"Ah." Skinner clapped a big hand down on his shoulder and gave a squeeze. Mulder looked up into his smiling dark eyes. "Well, I've got high hopes for the harvest, Fox." Skinner scanned the fields full of swaying crops. "It looks like it'll be a big one this year, so that should set us up for the Winter. Hopefully we'll be able to pay off Mr. Green, and buy us both a new pair of boots at the same time." Skinner glanced ruefully at his worn boots, and Mulder felt a sensation of misery settling into his stomach again.

Although this was all his fault, the adolescent voice inside him complained that he'd been punished enough, first by the whipping, and then by giving up most of his already limited free time to help Skinner out for so many weeks. An almost-forgotten adult voice argued back that Skinner had to go on working himself so hard because of Mulder's actions, and the least he could do was help out, but Mulder found himself ignoring his adult voice more and more these days.

"Chafing at the bit?" Skinner asked. Mulder looked up in surprise, and Skinner laughed. "I was your age once, and just as much of a handful as you are. You're getting restless and you need to blow off some steam. Tell you what, why don't you go off with your friends after school tomorrow. I can manage around here well enough."

"You mean that?" Mulder's eyes lit up, and Skinner laughed again, tousling the boy's hair affectionately.

"Yes. I must be getting soft in my old age. My old man would have had me home straight from school every night for a year for the stunt you pulled, but you've been sensible and well behaved for so long now that you'll probably explode if I don't let you run wild for a day or two."

"Thank you!" Mulder jumped into the air, then did a crazy little dance that made Skinner holler with laughter.

"Fox – a word of warning though." Skinner said, as they reached the house and went inside. Mulder looked up, his smile fading. "I'm not going to forbid you to see Alex, because I think you've got a right to choose your own friends, but just remember the trouble he got you into last time. When you're with him, you've got to use some good sense."

"I will." Mulder muttered, scowling, an adolescent irritation at having to listen to tedious parental warnings flaring inside him.

"Fox." Skinner's hand closed around his arm, and the big man pulled him around to face him. "I mean it." Skinner said firmly. "I know that you're 15 years old, and the consequences of your actions aren't always on your mind when you're having a good time, but if you forget, then I'll be here to remind you. You can rely on that." Mulder glared at him, but Skinner just laughed at the expression on the boy's face, and tousled his hair again. "Be careful the wind doesn't change and leave you looking like that," he remarked, before setting off in the direction of the recessed area they used as a kitchen, in order to fix them some supper. Mulder continued to glare after him.

"Want to go fishing after school?" Mulder asked Alex casually the next day.

Alex gave him a sly grin. "Pa given you permission to stay out then has he?" Alex taunted.

"No." Mulder flushed. "I don't need permission."

"Aw, baby too scared of big bad Papa Skinner that he has to ask if he can stay out late?" Alex made an irritating blubbering sound and waggled his lips with his finger.

"Oh shut up." Mulder threw himself on the other boy, and delivered a couple of punches. Alex just grinned at him.

"I'm bored with fishing anyway." Alex told him, pushing him off. "But..." he gazed at Mulder speculatively. "You can come back to the camp with me after school if you want."

"The camp?" Mulder bit on his lip. There were all sorts of rumors about the gypsy families, who camped on the plains, and the townsfolk didn't like them being there, but Mulder was intrigued. There was something wild and untamed about these people that fascinated him, and he longed to see where they lived. "Okay," he said, coming to a decision. He couldn't get into any trouble with Skinner just by going to have a look, he was sure about that. What harm could it do?

The gypsy encampment was a mess, and it smelled, and yet there was something curiously exotic about it. Horses roamed freely through the settlement, and a woman lay on the floor outside her tent, her petticoats up around her ears, snoring loudly.

"That's grandma. She's drunk." Alex grinned. Mulder was introduced to what seemed like a multitude of Kryceks, ranging in age from 3 months to 103, or so he was told, although he

didn't believe it, even if the wizened old lady Alex said was his great, great grandmama, **looked** as if she was that old. A huge fire in the center of the settlement was lit, and most of the men were standing around, drinking, while they waited for their supper. Mulder chewed his way through some sort of weird-tasting meal, and thought ruefully for a moment, about Skinner's cooking, and then there was some dancing – wild, gypsy dancing that enthralled Mulder, before a drunken fight broke the whole thing up.

"Is it always like this?" Mulder whispered as he and Alex slipped away from the fire.

"Yeah." Alex shrugged. "Mostly."

"No wonder you're always in trouble with Spender for not getting your homework done then."

"Spender. Huh." Alex spat on the ground. "He doesn't scare me."

"I've never been anywhere like this before." Mulder's eyes glowed with the excitement of this place, and these strange, passionate people.

"This? This is nothing. You wait until the next full moon. We're having a Gathering then – there'll be other gypsies from all over the place congregating on the plains. Now **that**'ll be a party." Alex grinned at him. "Want to come?"

Mulder hesitated.

"Whassamatter? Scared of old Pa again?" Alex taunted. "Scaredy Fox can't go out without Papa Skinner's say-so?"

"No." Mulder growled. "I can do what I like."

"Liar – he whipped you so bad after that firework thing that you're scared stiff of upsetting him now." Alex laughed. "I don't know why you even let him lay a finger on you. He isn't your real father. You should tell him where to go. You could come and live here with us."

"Live here?" Mulder glanced around the campsite, feeling a shiver at the thought of such an adventure.

"Yeah. I can do what I like. Nobody scares me." Alex grinned. "Now, are you gonna come to the Gathering?"

"Yes." Mulder nodded, feeling the need to match Alex's bravado with some of his own. "I'll be here."

The house was in darkness when Mulder got home, but he noticed a light shining in the woodshed and frowned. Skinner must be working late. Mulder walked to the woodshed and opened the door - just in time to notice Skinner stand up guiltily, and throw a large blanket over something he was working on.

"What's going on?" Mulder glanced over Skinner's shoulder.

Skinner grinned. "Nothing."

"Then what are you hiding?" Mulder asked, curious.

"All right, nosy, it's something for your birthday, if you must know!" Skinner told him.

"For my birthday?" Mulder repeated blankly. "But that's not for weeks."

"October 13th, that's what you told me." Skinner said with a nod. "It takes time to make something, Fox, and I want this to be something special for you."

"Really?" Mulder's face split in two as he smiled. "You're really making something just for me?"

"Of course. You're my boy aren't you?" Skinner said, picking up the lantern and putting an arm around Mulder, ushering him from the shed. "Now I don't want you sniffing around to get a peek of it either. It'll spoil the surprise."

"You're making me something..." Mulder repeated as they walked back to the house.

"Listen to you! Has nobody ever made you a present before?" Skinner shook his head wryly at Mulder's enchantment with the idea.

"No, I don't think they ever have." Mulder replied seriously, trying to remember. "I think they've bought me things, but I'm not sure that anyone's ever made something, with their own hands. That's kind of special."

"Well you're kind of special." Skinner laughed, tousling Mulder's hair in a way that Mulder had grown accustomed to. "Did you have a good evening? You're late getting home."

"Yeah, I had a good time. I went back to Alex's for supper."

"Uh-huh. And what did you think?" Skinner washed his hands, and dried them on the towel hanging by the basin.

"His folk are different, but I kind of liked them."

"Yes." Skinner nodded. "They have their enemies among the townsfolk, but live and let live is what I say. They don't do any harm."

"He says they're having a Gathering next full moon. He asked me if I wanted to go." Mulder held his breath, watching as Skinner looked up, his expression serious.

"Well, I'm sorry, Fox, but I'm afraid I can't allow you to go to that." Skinner told him. Mulder frowned, feeling a familiar resentment rising up inside him at being told he couldn't do something.

"Why not? You just said his people were okay. You said..."

"Hush." Skinner held up a hand. "They **are** okay, but their Gatherings have a reputation. They're no place for a kid your size. I'd worry about you all night if you went. There's a lot of drinking, and last time they had one, a man got stabbed. It's too dangerous, Fox. Do you hear me?" Skinner came over and put his hands on Mulder's shoulders. Mulder sighed and nodded, although secretly he was slightly relieved to be told so unequivocally that he couldn't go.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now, I have some news. Dr. Scully came by earlier and I invited her and her mother over for supper tomorrow."

"You did? Excellent!" Mulder's eyes lit up. It had been several weeks since he had seen his diminutive partner.

Mulder noticed that Skinner washed up and shaved, and changed into his best shirt before the Scullys arrived. He grinned to himself, and went to sit out by the road to watch for their buggy. It seemed that he wasn't the only one who was looking forward to seeing Scully.

Scully drove a broken-down old black buggy, her red hair flying around her face like a halo. Mulder didn't think she'd ever looked more beautiful, and, as he glanced around when he heard Skinner come out of the house, he was sure that Skinner felt the same way. Scully drove the horse like a crazy lady, and they came clattering into the yard making a noise. Skinner went up and quietened the animal with a few gentle words, taking hold of his bridle and talking to him. Then he went around and greeted Scully and her mother, helping first Mrs. Scully, and then her daughter down from the buggy, although Scully clearly didn't need any help.

Mulder gazed at his partner. She was younger than in his universe, but not by much, and her hair was long, and her nose a lot more freckled. She also laughed a lot more. Her sleeves were rolled up to her elbows, and she looked as if she didn't care much for tidiness or fashion. In fact she looked just like a tomboy who had never grown up.

"Hey, Fox. Any sprained ankles or bruised heads for me to take a look at?" She teased him. He blushed, and ducked his head.

"He's kept out of the wars recently." Skinner chuckled.

"Not for long, I expect." Scully laughed, putting an arm around Mulder's shoulder and hugging him. They were much the same height, which felt weird. Mulder was sure that he was more used to looking down on her, but now her bright blue eyes sparkled right opposite him.

"It's a nice evening. Did you fancy a stroll down to the creek before supper?" Skinner asked the ladies.

"Yes please!" Mrs. Scully smiled. "That sounds delightful."

"I'll unhitch the horse and then we'll set off. Fox can you give me a hand?"

"I've got some things in the buggy." Mrs. Scully called as they took care of the horse. "A box of clothes I've altered for Fox. I expect he'll be shooting up soon though and I'll have to take them down again. He's getting older."

"He is, yes." Skinner smiled at Fox.

"It's my birthday in October." Mulder blurted. "He's making me something." He gestured with his head in Skinner's direction.

"Yeah, but it's a surprise. He doesn't know what it is." Skinner grinned at the ladies.

"How old are you going to be?" Mrs. Scully asked, fondly wiping a lock of hair from Mulder's eyes as they started their walk down to the creek. Mulder opened his mouth, but Skinner jumped in first.

"Fifteen." he said.

Mulder stopped. "I'm fifteen now," he said.

Skinner nodded. "That's right."

"So I can't be fifteen next birthday." Mulder pointed out. Skinner nodded again, and Mulder noticed a faintly glazed look in the man's eyes.

"You'll be fifteen." Skinner repeated. Mulder glanced at the women, but they didn't seem to think anything strange had been said.

Mulder stood stock still, a cold fear clutching at his heart. Somehow, he wasn't sure how, he was caught in some sort of anomaly. He struggled with the word, and with the concept, completely unable to understand what was going on, and trying to remember what he could from his previous life in that other world that now seemed so distant. All he could think was that he was condemned never to grow up in this world, to always be fifteen for as long as he lived. He wouldn't grow old, and neither would Skinner. Time would move on, seasons would change, but he would always be fifteen, a perpetual adolescent. He didn't know how, or even why, he just knew that it was so.

"No," he whispered hoarsely, seriously freaked by the conclusion he had come to.

"Fox?" Skinner turned around to look at him, perplexed.

"I don't want to stay here. I don't want to be fifteen." Mulder told the man.

"I don't understand. You're happy here aren't you?" Even in the midst of his turmoil, Mulder recognised the hurt look that passed across Skinner's face.

"Yes, but..." Mulder looked around, at the creek, and the fields of corn and wheat, as they rippled in the evening sunshine. This place looked idyllic, but it was a trap, and it had him imprisoned. "I have to go," he said, and, ignoring the looks of amazement that everyone gave him, he took off, running as fast as he could, as if he could outrun the whole problem. Some instinct kicked in, an instinct that told him that he found solace while running, just running until his heart pounded and he couldn't think any more, running until he was far away.

The buggy was no longer in the front yard when he returned later that night. Mulder pushed open the door of the house and peered in. Skinner was sitting by the fire, staring into space. He turned when he heard Mulder and jumped to his feet, striding across the room to take Mulder in his arms and give him first a shake, and then a hug.

"What the hell was that all about, boy?" Skinner exclaimed. "I was worried sick about you. Why did you run off like that? It was so rude apart from anything else. I didn't know what to say to Dr. Scully and her mother, or how to excuse your behavior."

"It doesn't matter." Mulder muttered, trying to pull himself free of Skinner's embrace.

"It matters to me. I want an explanation." Skinner held fast to Mulder's shoulders, and looked him in the eye. "Now, Fox," he said, his tone firm.

"I don't have an explanation, not one you'd listen to anyway."

"Dr. Scully..."

"Oh shut up about her! I don't give a damn about her. I hate her and her stupid mother. I hate this whole stupid world! I fucking hate it, and I hate all of you." Mulder fumed. His legs barely touched the floor as Skinner propelled him over to the basin, grabbed a handful of soap, and, to Mulder's utter horror, thrust the soap into Mulder's mouth and scraped it around the back of his teeth.

"Fuck! Let me go." Mulder tried to wriggle out of Skinner's grasp but the man was too strong for him, and the soap continued to scrape insistently around his mouth. Then Skinner took hold of the wet dishcloth and squeezed that into Mulder's mouth as well, resulting in a soapy lather that made Mulder want to choke. Finally, Skinner picked Mulder up bodily and carried him into the corner, by the hearth, where he set him down facing the wall.

"Now stand there until you can be civil. I don't want to hear another word out of you, unless it's 'sorry'." Skinner growled. Mulder clenched his fists and was about to protest, and start swearing again, when he caught sight of Skinner's face. The other man looked more darkly furious than he had on the night of the fireworks fiasco, and Mulder didn't like to think what the consequences would be of pushing him any further. He ground his teeth together and then, for the first time, the truly disgusting taste of the soap kicked in. He spat it out on the floor, and rubbed a foaming lather from his lips, tears springing into his eyes. It didn't matter how many times he swallowed, he couldn't get rid of the taste. At last, utterly miserable, he laid his head against the wall, and began to cry.

The tears started slowly, then built up, and finally spilled out in racking sobs. Mulder was so caught up in his own misery that he didn't notice at first that Skinner was standing behind him, and had placed a hand on his shoulder. Then Skinner swung him around and held him close, and Mulder cried his eyes out on the other man's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." he whispered, although he was apologising more for crying than for what he had said.

"All right. Hush..." Skinner soothed his hair back from his head, then led him to the table and sat him down. "What was that outburst all about, Fox?"

"I don't know." Mulder shook his head and buried his face in his arms.

"I don't believe that, son." Skinner said gently, one of his big hands massaging Mulder's neck.

"I can't say. You won't understand." Mulder muttered sullenly.

"You could try me." Skinner offered. Mulder sat up, and stared into the big man's concerned brown eyes.

"No." Mulder said between hitching sobs. "It's no use."

"Well, I can't make you," Skinner sighed, "but I'll say one thing. I won't tolerate you speaking about Dr. Scully like that in this house. I also won't tolerate that kind of language. If you use it again, then I'll wash your mouth out again. Is that understood?"

Mulder stared at Skinner for a long while, every fiber of his being rebelling against the fact that he was trapped here, in this world, with no way of escape, not even by growing up.

"Yes, sir." He ground out at last. Skinner looked unhappy with his tone, but didn't take the matter any further.

"I think you should get some rest," he said, standing up. "It's late."

"I'm hungry. I didn't have any supper." Mulder complained.

"Who's fault is that?" Skinner raised an eyebrow.

"Are you telling me that I can't have anything to eat?" Mulder demanded.

"I'm telling you to go to bed. Maybe the combination of a soapy mouth and an empty stomach will give you something to think about. Now get moving." Skinner snapped. Mulder stood there for a moment, debating whether to argue the point, but he knew from previous experience just how strict Skinner could be, so he gave in, taking himself off to bed, and muttering to himself under his breath.

The atmosphere between them was strained for the next few days. Nothing could rouse Mulder from his sulk, and Skinner was unable to get through to him. Mulder refused to do his chores, and took off into the hills to think things through. He was reminded of Krycek, and his family, camped on the plains. At least they had a means of escape. Mulder knew that they stayed for a few months in one place and then moved on, but at least in roaming from place to place they saw something of the world. Maybe if he took up Krycek's offer, and joined them, he would find some way out of his predicament.

Mulder chewed on his lip, looking down on Skinner's house from his vantage point. He could see the big man moving around the farm, doing his chores, working in the fields, and Mulder felt a lump rise in his throat. All his safety and security in this world lay in that house, with that man, and that scared him. Maybe he needed to run away with the gypsies in order to discover how to survive. Mulder couldn't help wondering why he had been stranded here, in this situation. Was he supposed to learn something? And if so, how could he possibly learn it cooped up on this remote farm?

He had just about made his mind up to go with Krycek when he and his family left, when he thought about Skinner again. The man was making him something for his birthday. He said that he loved him. Mulder closed his eyes to stop the tears falling down his face. He knew that he had been happy living with Skinner, that he had experienced something he had never known before, in this life or the other one that he could barely remember. Skinner had showed him so many things. How to fight, how to work the farm, how to ride. More than that, he'd given Mulder an unconditional love that he was sure he had never had before, and a calm sense of peace and security, a sense of belonging - not to the farm, or even to this century, but to Skinner. He was a part of something, and he liked it. He couldn't say for sure, but he was fairly certain that last time around his childhood had been pretty unpleasant, that he had felt neither that he was loved nor that he belonged anywhere. Finding this Skinner, in this strange world, had, in a curious sense, been like coming home.

Mulder got to his feet in a turmoil of misery, and turned his back on the farm, wandering along the path until he came to the plains. He saw Krycek's dark head from afar, and made his way towards the other boy. Krycek grinned when he saw him.

"Pa let you out for the day did he?" Krycek asked.

"Shut up. I wanted to ask you - were you serious about me coming with you when you move on?" Mulder demanded.

"Yeah. Why not?" Krycek shrugged lazily. "We're going after the next Gathering. Just bring any money you have..." he grinned, "or that you can steal from Papa Skinner, and join us when we leave. He's not your real father. He can't make you stay."

Mulder nodded, recognizing the truth of Krycek's words, although feeling curiously dispirited by them. Alex was right - Skinner wasn't his father, and he could leave his house whenever he wanted, and go wherever he wanted. It would probably be for the best anyway. Skinner was already in debt because of him. He was a nuisance. In fact, Skinner probably only allowed him to stay because of some mis-placed sense of duty. Mulder knew

enough about the big man, both in this world, and that other one from his memory, to know that he took his duties and responsibilities seriously. Too seriously maybe.

"So are you going to come with us?" Krycek asked.

"Maybe. I'm not sure yet." Mulder replied.

"Well, we'll be leaving after the Gathering. So make your mind up by then." Krycek grinned.

Mulder woke up with the sensation of a heap of spiders crawling around in his stomach on the day of the Gathering. He hadn't told Skinner anything about what was on his mind. Instead he'd been rude and surly with the man, running off without doing his chores, skipping school. He knew it was only a matter of time before Skinner found out about his truancy, but he didn't care. Maybe, deep down inside, he was even hoping that Skinner would find out, that he would push Mulder into a row so that Mulder could make his decision and walk out. As it was, Mulder hesitated. Skinner had been good to him, and, knowing that, and also knowing what he contemplated doing, just made Mulder feel even guiltier, which in turn made him even more defensive and surly. Skinner gave him a wide berth for much of the time, obviously figuring out that whatever Mulder was going through, he needed some time and space to sort it out.

Mulder sloped around the farm listlessly all day, trying to come to a decision. He ate his supper silently, and then stared at his empty plate for an eternity, wrestling with himself. Finally, he decided that he'd go to the Gathering just to see what it was like. If he hated it, then he'd come back, and forget about joining the gypsies. It seemed like a good compromise. Mulder got to his feet, and walked to the door.

"Going somewhere?" Skinner asked. Mulder stopped, his face flushing. He'd been so busy making this huge decision that he'd forgotten that Skinner had forbidden him to go to the Gathering.

"Yes," he said defensively, in such a foul mood that he didn't care whether Skinner approved or not.

"Well?" Skinner raised an eyebrow.

"I don't have to tell you where I'm going." Mulder replied sullenly.

"At this time of night? I think you do." Skinner leaned against the fireplace, his eyes fixed on Mulder.

"I'm going to the Gathering." Mulder spat. "There. Are you going to stop me?"

Skinner seemed to consider this for a moment.

"No," he said finally. Mulder felt a surge of triumph, and turned to go once more.

"However." Skinner added. Mulder stopped, a sense of foreboding creeping over him. He turned back. Skinner's expression was unreadable, but his tone was firm. "You can go to the Gathering if you want, Fox. I don't seriously think I could stop you if you're hell bent on going. There's no lock on the door, and I can't stay awake all night watching you. However, I just want you to be fully aware what the consequences will be if you step foot outside that door this evening."

"Consequences?" Mulder hesitated, his hand on the door. Maybe Skinner would throw him out, maybe he was going to make his decision for him.

"That's right. If you disobey me on this matter, and leave this house this evening, then when you come home we'll go to the barn and I'll give you a whipping that I promise you'll remember for a very long time. It's up to you, Fox."

Skinner stood there, his face uncompromising. Mulder stared at him, trying to come to a decision. He didn't doubt that Skinner meant what he had said. However he also wanted to stick to his own decision. A small part of his brain told him that it didn't matter what Skinner threatened, as he probably wouldn't be coming back anyway. Some other part of him, deep inside, felt completely desolate about that thought, and the warring emotions overloaded his already fragile temper, making him explode.

"You can't tell me what to do, or where to go," he fumed, one hand reaching for the door handle, turning it.

"Fox, don't do this." Skinner implored him. "I meant what I said before - the Gathering isn't a safe place to be."

"I don't care." Mulder growled, wanting to regain some sense of control over this universe where he had been so unceremoniously dumped. He pushed the door open, stepped outside, and slammed the door back again behind him. Inside, a part of him was already trembling about what he had done, while another part of him felt exhilarated and free.

The Gathering was in full swing when he got there. He could see the fires and hear the drunken singing from miles away. Mulder joined the revelers, threading his way through the throng, looking for Krycek. It took a good half an hour to find him. Alex was perched on a barrel, laughing his head off, clearly drunk.

"Fox!" he grinned, beckoning to him. "Come over here and get yourself a drink." Krycek draped an arm over Mulder's shoulder. "There are lots of pretty girls here tonight," he whispered noisily. "Shall we see if we can get lucky? Huh?" He grinned, and belched all over Mulder who drew back and wrinkled up his nose. A thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Alex, how old am I?" He asked.

"What? Who the hell cares?" Krycek replied.

"I do." Mulder caught hold of Krycek's arm. "Tell me."

"You're fifteen." Krycek swayed and grinned, then belched again.

"And how old will I be next birthday?"

"What is this? A math lesson?" Krycek laughed. "You'll be...uh..." Mulder saw a familiar glazed expression pass over Krycek's face. "Fifteen of course." Krycek laughed, and handed Mulder a tankard. Mulder took one look at it, then downed the contents in a single gulp.

Mulder wasn't sure when he lost Krycek. In fact, he wasn't sure of anything any more. He wandered around in a drunken haze, giggling to himself. The flames from the fires lit up the plain, making everything seem wild, and exotic, and the gypsy music played loudly, with a thrumming beat that made his heart pound in his chest, and his feet tap impatiently. Mulder whirled a girl around, and then another, and their faces became grotesque, laughing at him as he took another tankard full of liquor and swallowed it. The beat seemed to get faster, and he could no longer see his feet - everything was a blur. He crashed into another girl, and laughed, taking her in his arms and twirling her around. Then, all of a sudden, he felt someone grab him from behind, and he was thrown bodily away from the dance.

"She's **mine**," someone hissed.

"Okay, okay..." he slurred, walking unsteadily away from the fire, trying to get his bearings. He felt a sudden urge to be sick, and leaned over, vomiting up what felt like the entire contents of his stomach. His head hurt, and he wanted...he wanted to go home. You are home, a little voice told him, and that hurt even more than the pain in his head. He vomited again, and then he felt something sharp press against the back of his neck. He stiffened. What was it Skinner had said? There'd been a stabbing at the last Gathering?

"Hold still, kid. Let's see if you've got any money." A hand rifled through his pockets.

"Please...I haven't. Please..." he whispered. The hand turned him around, and he could see the knife now, gleaming in the firelight. The man was large, and his hands were filthy. Mulder could smell the drink on his breath.

"Please...I have to be..." Mulder leaned over and was sick again on the ground. The man drew back in disgust, then turned Mulder over with his boot, and checked his front pockets. Mulder blinked. The knife was close to his throat, so close that he could feel the cold steel.

"Please...don't kill me..." he whispered, wanting to retch again, and so scared that he could barely move. "I don't have any money..." He blinked again, as the knife disappeared, and so did the man. Mulder sat up, his head protesting, and watched as someone large silently kicked his assailant to the ground, leaving him there, groaning and semi-conscious.

"Fox?"

Mulder let out a sigh of relief, as he recognized Skinner. The man's head seemed to glow in the firelight and his features were blurred to Mulder's befuddled vision, but it was definitely him.

"He had a knife...he could have killed me." Mulder babbled, as Skinner helped him off the ground.

"Yes, he could." Skinner put an arm around Mulder's shoulders to hold him up, and walked him away from the Gathering. "Come on. The horse is this way." Skinner half dragged, half carried Mulder to the horse, then heaved him up onto it, getting on behind him.

"I'm going to be sick again..." Mulder said when they were halfway home. Skinner held him a little way from the horse, while he spewed his guts out, and then they continued back to the farm.

Skinner carried Mulder into the house and laid him on his bed, then brought him a cup of water.

"Drink it," he said. "All of it. God, how much liquor did you drink, Fox?"

"I don't remember," Mulder groaned, feeling sure that he would throw up again. Skinner brought him a bucket, and placed it beside the bed, and Mulder heaved up the contents of his stomach into it obligingly.

"You're not used to alcohol and the gypsies brew their own. That stuff is lethal." Skinner told him.

"Yeah. I know that now." Mulder mumbled. Skinner sighed and shook his head, smoothing Mulder's hair out of his eyes.

"I was worried about you, son," he whispered. Mulder closed his eyes to shut out the guilt he felt, and turned his head away. Skinner sighed again, and got up to go. Mulder reached out and grabbed the man's hand.

"I'm glad you came after me. Thanks for rescuing me." Mulder whispered, still unable to look at Skinner.

"You're welcome." Skinner placed his other hand over Mulder's for a moment, and then let go.

"Get some rest, Fox," he whispered. Mulder was sure that he felt Skinner's lips brush against his head before he fell asleep.

Mulder awoke with a pounding headache. He sat up, and groaned, and then heard Skinner chuckle from where he was seated at the table.

"I take it you're awake then?" Skinner said. He got up and came over to the curtained recess where Mulder slept. "How are you feeling?" Skinner sat down on the side of the bed and looked down on him.

"Awful." Mulder muttered. His tongue felt furry and stiff, and he ached.

"Here. Drink this." Skinner handed him a cup of water, and Mulder drank it down eagerly. "Drink as much water as possible. That's what used to work for me in this situation." Skinner said grimly. Mulder looked up, aware that this was a sensitive subject for Skinner.

"Thanks," he muttered, as Skinner brought a jug over and filled his cup again.

"And eat." Skinner told him. "You might not feel like it, but it does help. You'll have to take my word for that."

"Okay." Mulder nodded. He got up cautiously, and went outside to relieve himself and wash. He felt better once he was clean - his clothes stank of smoke, alcohol and vomit, so he changed and finally sat down to the breakfast table, although he could tell from the position of the sun that it was a long way past breakfast time. Skinner handed him a plate of bread and cheese and Mulder did his best to eat it, despite the protests of his tender stomach. Skinner was right though. He felt much better afterwards. Skinner disappeared back out onto the farm, and Mulder took another nap. By the time Skinner returned later in the evening, Mulder felt much better.

"So, was the Gathering what you expected?" Skinner asked, as he washed up for dinner.

"Not really." Mulder admitted, flushing. He sat down at the table, feeling sick again, but this time from apprehension rather than as a result of the alcohol he had consumed.

"Was that the first time you've been drunk?" Skinner asked, bringing them over some of last night's dinner, which he'd reheated.

"Yes, no...I think so. I'm not sure." Mulder replied, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. He played with his food, and watched the big man across the table out of the corner of his eye. Skinner seemed oblivious to his discomfort. He was eating his meal with his usual hearty appetite. He didn't look too angry...but even so, Mulder was scared. At last he couldn't bear it. As Skinner finished his last mouthful, Mulder asked him the question that had been on his mind all day.

"Sir...are you going to whip me?" He whispered.

Skinner glanced up. "What do you think, Fox?" He asked quietly.

"I think...that you will." Mulder replied, his throat dry.

"Well, you're right." Skinner pushed back his plate, and took a sip of water. "I said that I would, and I will. You know me well enough by now to know that I keep my promises."

"Yes, sir." Mulder bit on his lip, and looked at his half-eaten plate of food. "When, sir?" He asked at last.

"You're worried - I can understand that. The time spent waiting for a whipping has to be the worst in all the world. I remember once, when I was about your age, my father took some of our stock to market, leaving me to help my mother on the farm. She asked me to watch a

big pot of clothes boiling over the fire, only I found something better to do with my time and they boiled dry, burning two of my father's shirts. I remember waiting all day for him to come home, knowing that I'd get a whipping when he did. That was the longest day of my life."

Mulder listened to this story, wide-eyed. He couldn't imagine Skinner ever being naughty enough to deserve a whipping, but somehow he was pleased to learn that he had.

"Are you going to make me wait too, sir, to punish me more?" he muttered, still playing with his food.

"Of course not." Skinner took a sharp intake of breath. "I wanted to make sure you were fully recovered first. Are you?" Skinner asked. He put out a hand and raised Mulder's chin up so that the boy looked into his eyes. Mulder thought about it for a moment, and considered lying, but then he decided that would only delay the inevitable.

"Yes, sir." He nodded, looking into Skinner's dark, serious eyes.

"Very well." Skinner got up, and went over to the big wooden chest in the corner of the room. He opened it up, and, while Mulder watched, intrigued, he rummaged through it. Finally he found what he was looking for, and pulled out a worn, faded strap. "This was what my Pa used on us when we disobeyed him," Skinner told him. "Come on, let's get this over with."

He put a hand on Mulder's shoulder, and opened the door, ushering the boy out into the yard and walking him down to the barn. Mulder wasn't sure whether Skinner kept his hand clamped onto his shoulder to stop him from running away, or to keep him from shaking too much, but either way, he was curiously grateful. A part of him knew that he could twist out from under that hand and just tell Skinner that he wasn't staying. He was sure that if he ran up to the gypsy camp he could find Krycek before it was too late, and go away with him and his family. However he knew that he didn't want to. The Gathering had scared him. He didn't belong there - he could have been killed. If Skinner hadn't come along when he had...Mulder shivered, remembering the press of cool steel against his skin.

"Fox?" Skinner looked down at him.

"I was thinking about that man, the one with the knife. If you hadn't shown up when you did..." Mulder whispered.

"I said it was dangerous." Skinner told him, opening the barn door. "Maybe you'll listen to me next time."

"I will." Mulder promised.

Skinner laughed out loud, a grim, mirthless laugh. "Well, we can only hope." He shook his head.

Once inside the barn, Mulder shivered again, only from nervous anticipation this time.

"All right, Fox. I'm sure you remember what to do." Skinner nodded at the bales of hay, and Mulder nodded and bit on his lip. He unbuttoned his pants and pushed down his shorts, then he bent over the scratchy bales. There was a wait that seemed to go on for an eternity, before Skinner laid the first stroke across his bottom. Mulder actually cried out in surprise as much as pain as the blow struck home.

"It stings, I know." Skinner commented. "Pa's strap always stung so bad. Worse than his belt, much worse." Mulder yelled again as the strap whipped across his butt a few more times. Skinner paused.

"You've been behaving like a brat for days now, Fox. Maybe I should have taken you to task about it before, but it seemed like you had something on your mind. I'm going to be pretty tough on you, son, and this strapping is going to hurt like hell. Afterwards, I hope you'll make up your mind to be the bright, helpful boy you've always been, and not the sullen kid whose been making everyone's lives miserable recently."

Mulder buried his face in the straw, and took a deep breath as the strap whipped down again. Skinner was going so fast that the pain of the strokes blurred into one another, until Mulder didn't think he could bear any more.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." he repeated in a mantra, the tears running down his face. Skinner stopped, but kept his hand on Mulder's back, making it clear that this was just a pause.

"Do you know why you've been behaving like a brat recently, son?" He asked.

"No..." Mulder gulped, and the strap lashed down again. "Owww!" he screamed. Skinner turned his attention to the tops of Mulder's thighs, which stung even more than feeling the strap on his butt. Soon Mulder was sure that he'd never sit down again. "I promise I won't behave this way again. I promise..." Mulder wept. "I know I disobeyed you, and you were right...I shouldn't have gone...unnnnhh...owwww, I'm sorry." He dissolved into incoherent moans as Skinner laid another couple of licks across his buttocks, then stepped back.

Mulder lay sobbing on the bale for a moment, then looked up. Skinner was looking down at him, his expression still stern, but softer than it had been earlier.

"All right, I'm going to give you a few moments to pull yourself together - then I want you to come back up to the house. You should know after last time, that a strapping isn't over until we've had a good talk. I expect you to have something to say," Skinner told him. Mulder nodded, and waited until he heard the barn door close behind Skinner before getting to his feet. He pulled his shorts up gingerly, and buttoned up his pants, then leaned against the barn wall for a while until his breathing calmed down. He could still feel the tears running down his face, though. Finally, not wishing to anger Skinner further by dawdling for too long, he walked slowly and carefully back up to the house. His butt hurt with each step he took, and it felt as if it was on fire. He pushed the door open, and saw Skinner seated at the table, waiting for him. The strap lay on the table between them. Mulder moved gingerly

across the room, and got a pillow from his bed, then returned and placed it on his chair. He sat down very cautiously, tears still rolling down his cheeks.

"Fox." Skinner put out a hand and tousled his hair, and Mulder felt the tears get worse, until he was sobbing again. Skinner got up and came around to his side of the table, enveloping Mulder in a hug, and Mulder cried against the big man's stomach, his arms around his waist. Finally the sobs subsided, and Skinner sat back down again.

"What's it all been about, Fox?" he asked.

"I'm not sure." Mulder shrugged. He noticed Skinner's face darken, and he also noted the strap lying on the table in front of him, and he winced. "That is...I got scared. Alex asked me if I wanted to go away with his people." Mulder saw the pain on Skinner's face as he made this admission, and almost wished that he hadn't.

"And what did you say?" Skinner asked quietly.

"I wasn't sure." Mulder admitted honestly.

"I see." Skinner got up, and walked across to the fire. He leaned against the wall for a moment, lost in thought. "I can't keep you here if you don't want to stay, you know that, Fox." Skinner told him. "You're not my son. If you want to go, I can't stop you."

"I don't want to go." Mulder cried. Skinner looked relieved, but the hurt expression remained in his eyes. "It's just I feel so trapped. I don't know why I'm here, and that scares me."

"Well I've been thinking about that too." Skinner said, steepling his fingers and looking into the fire. "I think you've been sent here for a reason, Fox. I don't know why, or how, but I think you're supposed to be here, with me. Why else did you arrive the way you did? Appearing out of nowhere - no sign of a horse, wearing those strange clothes, no memory of who you were. Nobody came looking for you either. It seemed right that you landed on my farm. Why else would you turn up here?"

"I don't know." Mulder admitted. "I don't know." He shook his head.

"Fox, I don't have all the answers either. I know this is a small farm, and the world's a big place - of course you're curious - but there'll be time enough for you to explore later on, when you're grown up. For now, I think you're supposed to stay here, and I want you to stay here."

"I'm so much trouble." Mulder whispered. "That man last night - he could have killed you."

"I don't think so." Skinner snorted. "I can take care of myself - and I can take care of you. That's my point. I want to take care of you, for now at least, and you do seem to need taking care of."

"I..." Mulder felt the tears springing into his eyes again. "I'm sorry," was all he could think of saying.

"I love you, Fox. I've told you that before, and I mean it." Skinner said softly, coming to hug the boy again. "Now, are you going to stay?" He asked, looking into Mulder's tear-stained face.

"Yes. I want to stay, I always wanted to stay." Mulder replied.

"Well, if you're going to stay then I think there's something we must do." Skinner told him gravely.

"What's that?" Mulder looked up. Skinner picked up the strap and handed it to Mulder, who took it, nervously.

"My Pa used to keep this hanging on the wall, to remind us to behave ourselves. My own boys had a healthy respect for it as well. I think, if you're going to be around, and getting into this much trouble, we should keep this hanging somewhere in plain sight as a reminder."

Mulder gulped. "That won't be necessary...I'll be good from now on...I promise," he said earnestly.

Skinner laughed. "I'm sure you mean that now, but you'll forget. I was your age once - I remember how it is. I think keeping this in sight as a reminder might mean that we have to use it less often," Skinner told him. "Here." He got out a hammer and nail, and handed them to Mulder. "Bang that in over here," he instructed. Mulder did as he was told, and banged the nail into the wall, then Skinner handed him the strap again. "Hang it up." Mulder noticed that the strap had a hole punched in the leather at one end, and he placed it over the nail. "Good. Now - you didn't finish your supper earlier. How about a snack now?" Skinner asked. "I still have some of those cookies Mrs. Scully brought over."

Mulder nodded, his eyes transfixed by the strap. He already hated the thing and he'd only made its acquaintance this evening.

Mrs Scully's cookies were very tasty, and Mulder felt his appetite returning now that the whipping was out of the way. He gazed at Skinner as he ate. The other man was still solemn, and Mulder wished that he hadn't told him how tempted he had been to leave. His heart ached when he thought about how much trouble he had brought to this good, kind man. He'd been nothing but trouble since he had arrived, and now he had hurt Skinner with his lack of gratitude. He wondered again how long the big man had been alone, and what had happened to his family. He wished he knew some way of bringing happiness back into Skinner's life, and making him smile again.

"Are you in love with Dr. Scully?" he blurted, surprising even himself.

"What?" Skinner exclaimed. "What sort of question is that, boy?"

"I just wondered." Mulder gave a ghost of a grin. "She's pretty isn't she?"

"Dr. Scully is a fine woman, and I'm very fond of her, and her mother. They've both been very kind to me." Skinner's voice faltered.

"Why don't you ask her out?" Mulder urged. A look of pain passed across Skinner's face.

"That wouldn't be appropriate." Skinner replied stiffly.

"Why?" Mulder looked up, his mouth still full of cookie. "Is it...you never talk about what happened to your family. Aren't you free to wed again?"

"That's enough." Skinner slammed his fist down, and Mulder jumped in surprise. Skinner wasn't usually so quick to lose his temper.

"I'll go to bed," he whispered, sliding down from the table, and tiptoeing away.

He cried himself to sleep. He couldn't do anything right, and everything he did to try to make things better just made them worse. He was a nuisance, and he was sure that Skinner resented him. He must be a constant reminder of the family the big man had lost, and last night he had proved just how much trouble he could be. Mulder shuddered again, as he remembered that knife pressed against his throat, and how Skinner had lifted him onto his horse, and taken him back here, to safety. The man had risked his life for Mulder, and Mulder knew in his heart that he didn't deserve it. Tonight, when Skinner had demanded an explanation, Mulder had only been able to give him half of one, but he wasn't the only one with secrets. What had happened to Skinner's family, Mulder wondered? He had assumed they were dead, or that Sharon had taken the children away somewhere, but if they were dead why did Skinner look so guilty every time he asked questions about them, and why was he so defensive? It surely wasn't Skinner's fault that his family had died, was it? Mulder's over-wrought adolescent imagination conjured up a scenario in which a rampaging Skinner had killed his entire family in a drunken rage one night. Mulder curled up into a tight ball, his heart aching as much as his backside as he fell into a troubled sleep, tears still falling silently down his cheeks.

Skinner listened to the boy crying for a long time, his hands clenched into fists by his side. Finally he couldn't stand it any more, and got up, going to sit on Mulder's bed, to try and comfort him, but he saw that Mulder had already fallen asleep, tightly scrunched up. Skinner reached out, and gently wiped away the tears that were still running down Mulder's cheeks. He soothed the boy's hair away from his forehead and stroked his head tenderly for several minutes, lost in thought. Mulder's body relaxed and he sighed in his sleep. Skinner gave the faintest hint of a smile, and leaned over to kiss the boy's forehead. Then he got up, shaking his head as he looked down on Mulder's sleeping form.

As he turned to go, he noticed the strap hanging from the wall and sighed. Even now, he could still remember his fear of that strap from his own youth. Whenever he smart-mouthed his mother, or even his siblings, his father would point to the strap with a warning in his dark eyes, and Skinner would apologize immediately. He hadn't liked seeing it there, but he was sure that having it in plain sight had saved him from a few whippings as a boy. It

had proved to be a very effective deterrent, and if it would work the same magic on Fox, then it would go easier on them both in the long run.

Mulder got up cautiously the next day. His backside still hurt worse than anything he could remember before, and sent flashes of pain through his whole body when he moved too quickly. Skinner seemed subdued, and with a wretched sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, Mulder knew that he had ruined everything. How could Skinner ever forgive him for his disloyalty? He knew that he had hurt the big man too much to ever expect him to think well of him ever again.

They had barely finished breakfast when they heard a whooping sound, and a horse clattered into the yard. They went outside to find Cal Hopper, from the neighboring farm, reining his horse to a halt.

"Good news! The gypsies are moving on! They're striking camp and leaving!" Hopper yelled, before he set off again to deliver the news elsewhere. Mulder felt as if he had received a blow to the stomach, and then he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up in surprise, into Skinner's concerned eyes.

"He didn't even say goodbye, did he?" Skinner said softly.

"No." Mulder buried his face in Skinner's chest, and closed his eyes, beyond tears.

"Well, there's nothing to stop you from going to say goodbye to him." Skinner murmured.

"It's too late. By the time I get there, they'll be gone." Mulder replied, his voice muffled by Skinner's shirt.

"Maybe - but if we took the horse we might get there in time. Is it worth a try?" Skinner said. Mulder looked up, his eyes full of hope. He was no horseman himself, but Skinner was. "Yes?" Skinner asked.

Mulder nodded. "Yes!"

Skinner got the horse saddled up, and pulled Mulder up in front of him, and Mulder hung on for dear life as Skinner galloped them over the hills and down into the plains. His backside hurt like hell as he was flung around on the horse's back, but that wasn't anything he was going to complain about, and certainly not to Skinner. They went as fast as was humanly possible, but even so they were too late.

Mulder's heart sank as the plains came into view. They were strewn with the detritus of the campsite - old fires, dried circles of yellowed grass where the tents had been - but no people. A few of the fires still smoldered, sending up wistful columns of smoke into the blue sky.

Mulder dismounted, and wandered around disconsolately, while Skinner watched him from the horse, his eyes sad. The big man waited patiently while Mulder kicked over the remains of a fire, and stared into the distance for a long time, trying not to let his misery show on his

young face. Finally, Mulder took a deep breath and returned to the horse. Skinner pulled him back on wordlessly, and set the horse off for the house, at a slow trot. His arms held Mulder tighter than before, and Mulder was glad about that. He closed his eyes and leaned back, wishing that he could block out the past two days of his life, or somehow re-live them.

"I'm sorry, Fox." Skinner said some time later, as the house came into view.

"It doesn't matter." Mulder shook his head.

"Yes, it does. He was your friend, and he let you down. I'm very sorry. You didn't deserve that."

"I probably did." Mulder slid off the horse's back. "If you don't mind, I'd like to be alone."

"Of course." Skinner watched as the boy ran off, his long, loping strides taking him deep into the hills. He guessed that would be the last he'd see of Fox before supper.

Skinner was so busy working hard in the fields, getting the crops ready for harvest that he had little time to spend with Mulder for the next few weeks. Mulder was subdued himself, with no Alex to hang out with. School was in recess for the summer, and Mulder helped Skinner in the fields, and occasionally wandered over to Pendrell's house to see his other friend. Mulder knew that Skinner had high hopes for this harvest - the big man's sense of anticipation was almost palpable.

"It's the best crop I've ever had, Fox." Skinner said excitedly. "It'll earn us a good sum. We'll have enough to set us up for a couple of years. I can buy more stock, and we can expand the farm. I can plant more crops next year - maybe hire some people to help out. Soon I'll have enough saved to send you to a proper school, maybe to put you through college..." he talked on, his eyes animated, and Mulder loved to watch him. He was suddenly aware, with an intensity that actually hurt him, that he loved this man who had been more of a father to him than his own had ever been, from the little he could remember. He loved the way Skinner's grave features were transformed by his pride and pleasure in his work, and admired the way the big man worked so long and so tirelessly in the fields. "We'll certainly have enough to pay off our debt to Mr. Green." Skinner grinned, cuffing Mulder's head lightly. Mulder grinned back, relieved at the thought of no longer having **that** hanging over his head.

"And you can buy yourself some new boots at last too!" Mulder laughed, joining in the big man's infectious mood of optimism.

Mulder was awakened at dawn a few days later, by the sound of thunder. He tried to ignore it, but it grew louder and louder, and then a flash of lightning speared through the sky, lighting up the entire house. Mulder heard Skinner get up, and open the door, then he heard the big man curse.

"Fox, get up. It's hail...oh god..." Skinner ran out into the yard, pulling on his shirt as he ran, and Mulder followed him. He watched, his mouth open in horror, as hailstones the size of plums rained down on them. "The crops..." Skinner went running down into the fields, and

Mulder chased after him, but the storm was fast and furious, and there was nothing they could do.

They watched helplessly as the fruits of so many weeks of hard labor were destroyed before their eyes in the space of less than half an hour. Skinner's bald head was bleeding where the ferocious hail had hit him on his unprotected scalp, but even so, it took Mulder hours to persuade him to return to the house. Even when the storm had passed them by, the big man refused to leave his stricken crops. Instead he walked around his fields, repairing the damage as best he could, but it was obvious that the storm had wreaked terrible damage - fully two thirds of the crop had been destroyed. Finally, Skinner allowed Mulder to pull him back into the house. The boy sat the man down in his chair by the fire, and went to get a bowl of water, cleaning the blood from the big man's head, and then bringing him some hot, strong coffee.

Skinner sat, unmoving, in his chair for several hours, with Mulder crouched helplessly beside him, wishing he could do something, anything, to alleviate the tragedy that had befallen his beloved surrogate father. Finally, Skinner seemed to come back to life again.

"Oh well," he said, his jaw clenching in a way that Mulder found oddly familiar. "No use will come of crying over what can't be helped. We're no worse off than before. These boots can be mended again." He picked up his worn boots, and looked at them thoughtfully. "I can still carve - and people still need furniture. We'll get by." He nodded, as if to convince himself, but Mulder could see the worried look in his eyes, and he knew how poor they really were. There was no spare cash, and Skinner would be hard pushed to earn enough to keep them both clothed and fed during the long winter months, however hard he worked.

Mulder went to bed early that night, but he kept the curtain pulled a little way open, and watched from his bed as Skinner settled down to mend his boots for the hundredth time since Mulder had lived with him. At some point, Mulder drifted off to sleep, for when he awoke several hours had passed. He saw that the candle was still burning in the other room, and peered around the side of the curtain. Skinner was sitting where he had left him, but he had something in his hands. Mulder held his breath - Skinner was staring at the bottle of whisky he kept in the house, and he looked as if he was seriously tempted to open it, and down the contents in one gulp.

"Don't." Mulder said, before realizing that he had spoken. Skinner turned, and Mulder slipped out of the bed and went over to him. "Please don't." Mulder implored.

"Why not? What is there to stay sober for? Just a bit of this, and I'll forget." Skinner said, his big hands toying with the bottle.

"Please, you're scaring me," Mulder whispered. "I don't want you to drink. My father used to drink..." He closed his eyes, remembering the smell of whisky, and his father's maudlin alcoholic temper.

"Fox?" Skinner reached out a hand to touch Mulder's shoulder, and Mulder, still lost in his memory, flinched. He saw the look of shock in Skinner's eyes, then the big man got up and

put the bottle of whisky back in the cupboard. He came and stood before Mulder, and smiled wanly. "If anything decided me, that did," he said. "I saw that look in my sons' eyes once. I don't ever want to see it again."

"How bad is it?" Mulder asked. "Will we have enough food?"

"We'll be fine." Skinner said, but Mulder wasn't fooled. "We might have to tighten our belts, but we'll get by. Now, I think you should get back to bed."

Mulder nodded miserably, and did as he was told. He lay there, thinking everything through in his head, and finally came to a conclusion. Skinner might just get by if there was only one mouth to feed, but not two.

Just before dawn, he got up, and wrapped up his meagre belongings in a blanket. Then he wrote a note for Skinner, before tip-toeing silently across the room, and out of the door.

End of Part Two

Part Three: Home is Where... by Xanthe

Author's Notes:

Mulder finds the answers to some questions about Skinner, and discovers where he wants to be.

Posted 28th June, 1999

A big thank you to Phoebe for providing some technical information, and Alleycat for beta reading.

Mulder didn't really have a clear idea where he was going - he just knew that he had to leave the safety of Skinner's house behind him, and make his own way in the world. He glanced down at his skinny body ruefully. He wished that he was taller, and stronger - he might have been able to get work on the railroads then - but he knew that he didn't exactly look as if he could put in a hard day's work. If anything, with his freckled face, and a certain innocence to his expression, he looked younger than his fifteen years. He did feel a pang of pity for Skinner. He knew that the big man would be saddened to find his note, but he was also sure that once Skinner thought about it, he'd see that it was for the best.

Mulder decided to head for the next town before looking for work. He was too well known at Pine Creek. He walked for miles, then sat down and ate the lunch he had packed for

himself before leaving. He was tempted to eat the whole lot in one go, he was so hungry, but common sense told him that he didn't know where the next meal was coming from, so he reluctantly saved some of the food, and packed it away again.

He made camp under a hedgerow and lay looking up at the stars. It was a beautiful evening, and still warm, although fall was coming on, and the leaves were just starting to turn brown. He closed his eyes, and in his mind's eye saw Skinner, sitting alone at his supper table. He tried to banish that thought, but instead all he could think of was his comfortable bed, and the daily routine of chores that had been his life at the farm. Mulder sighed and turned over, trying to block out these thoughts. That was the past, and he had to move on.

Mulder began by asking for work at the farms he came across. Some people were generous, and took pity on the boy, giving him a meal in exchange for a couple of hours of labor. Others were less kind, and ordered him off their land curtly. Mulder grew thinner as the weeks passed, but he was determined to press on. He found work for a few days, doing chores for an old lady in Clarktown while her grandson was sick, but had to move on when the boy recovered. Sometimes Mulder was so tired, and hungry, that he cried himself to sleep, and then he would dream that Skinner was sitting beside him, smoothing the wet hair out of his eyes.

One night, he was sleeping under a hedgerow when he was awakened by barking dogs. He got up, and looked around, panic-stricken, and disorientated. Three hunting dogs ran through the darkness towards him, their teeth bared, baying furiously. Mulder stood quite still, sure that they would rip him to shreds, but they were called off at the last moment. A tall, thin man, carrying a gun, strode towards him, flashing his lantern, and grabbed Mulder by the collar.

"What are you doing here, boy? Poaching?" The man demanded.

"No, sir." Mulder gulped, pointing to his blanket, and meagre belongings. "I'm just passing through."

"You're trespassing!" The man spat.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"Hmm. All right." The man's face broke into a cruel smile. "I'll take you at your word and let you go." Mulder breathed a sigh of relief. "But I think we'll have a little sport with you first," the man said. "You've got..." he glanced at his pocket watch, "half an hour's head start, then I'll set the dogs after you. Let's see if you can make it off this land by then."

"Please, I..." Mulder glanced at the dogs, who were straining at their leashes, still barking.

"29 minutes." The man grinned.

Mulder picked up his belongings, and fled.

He crashed through the undergrowth, panting, his body protesting at the exertion after the weeks of poor nutrition, and living rough. He could still hear the dogs barking in the distance, and he despaired of finding his way in the dark. He ran down a slope, and found a stream at the bottom, waded through it, trying to disguise his scent, and then ran on again. He was running through a wood, when he heard the dogs again, and he picked up his pace, his breathing coming in sobbing gasps. The branches of the trees whipped against his face, but he could hear the dogs closing on him, and he carried on blindly. He was running so fast that he didn't see the tree root until it tripped him. He fell head over heels down a slope, his ankle throbbing from where it had been caught, and knocked his head against a stone, cutting the side of his face. He put out an arm to break his fall, and felt a pain drive through his wrist. All the breath was crushed out of his body as he came to a halt, winded, and then, mercifully, he lost consciousness.

When he awoke, the first thing he was aware of was the heat, stifling him, and the distant sounds of people going about their daily business. Mulder opened his eyes, and tried to move, then cried out, as his whole body protested.

"I'd keep still if I was you," a voice said. Mulder saw a little old woman sitting on a stool beside him in the stable.

"Where am I?" He croaked.

"Mr. Cator's stable, and you're lucky to be given this much shelter. Trash like you don't deserve such kindness," she hissed, poking him with her walking stick. Mulder's head hurt, and he didn't know who Mr. Cator was, he just knew that his straw was warm, and he didn't want to move. "The doctor's comin', although I was in half a mind not to bother. Trash like you should be fed to the hounds," the woman mumbled, rocking her gnarled old body back and forth.

"Could I have some water?" Mulder asked, his throat rasping and dry.

"Horses drink from the trough." She nodded. "I'm not your servant. Get your own." Mulder struggled to sit up, but his head hurt too much, and he slumped back down again, feeling nauseous.

"I'm hungry..." he whispered. The old woman laughed.

"You won't be fed. The cheek of it. The pup wants to be fed." She shook her head and looked at him disapprovingly. Mulder lay back on the warm straw and closed his eyes, too ill even to care.

A noise outside woke him a few hours later. He opened his eyes, and winced as the bright light seared straight through his optic nerves and into his pounding head. His chest felt tight and his throat hurt. The commotion in the yard materialised into the large burly frame of a man, who ran across the stable towards him, accompanied by a small, red haired woman.

"Fox? Is it you? Fox!" Mulder felt a big hand on his forehead, and found himself looking into a pair of dark, joyful eyes. "We've found you." Skinner said, kneeling in the straw beside the boy, and taking hold of Mulder's hand. "Dana - is he all right? Tell me he'll be all right." Skinner looked at the doctor, and Mulder found himself gazing into her blue eyes as she came into his field of vision.

"Where does it hurt, Fox? What happened to you?" She asked.

"Hurts everywhere." Mulder croaked through parched lips. "Ankle, arm, throat...ribs...please, water..."

"The boy wants water!" Skinner looked around.

"In the trough. I told him to get his own." The old woman cackled.

"You did what? He can't walk!" Skinner drew himself up to his full, threatening height, and the woman's cackle died down.

"Don't look at me like that. I said to send for the quack - the lady doctor." The old woman nodded her head at Scully. "They said to just let him die or get better, but I said to send for her."

"But you couldn't bring him water?" Skinner asked. The old woman shrugged.

"The pup had no business being on this land. Mr. Cator's men should have shot him and had done with. Poachers don't deserve any..."

"My boy is not a poacher." Skinner stood up straight, and the old woman backed away from him. Skinner turned away from her in disgust and went to get the water, bringing it back in a pail and cupping it in his hands to hold it against Mulder's parched lips.

"Your boy, your boy," the old woman cackled. "What's the boy doing out and about on his own, huh? Up to no good, that's what." Skinner ignored her, and looked at Scully.

"Is he okay?" he asked.

"Yes, or at least he will be if we can get him somewhere warm and clean. He's got a broken ankle, a sprained wrist, and some bruising on his ribs. I don't think they're broken though. I'm more worried about the fever - he's having trouble breathing, too."

"Fox - what happened?" Skinner asked, crouching beside the boy.

"Man set his dogs on me...ran, and ran, but they kept coming. I fell...it hurts...man said I was poaching. I wasn't, I was just sleeping. I was just sleeping, sir..." Mulder said desperately, as if it were very important that Skinner understood that.

"It's okay. Hush." Skinner soothed the boy. He stood up and turned to the old woman.

"Where is Mr. Cator?" He asked.

"He won't speak to your sort." The woman spat. "You can speak to his gamekeeper - he brought the boy in. Should have left him if you ask me."

"Go and get him." Skinner growled. She looked as if she wanted to argue, but Skinner was so large, and his expression so forbidding, that at last she turned and wandered off, grumbling under her breath as she went.

The old woman returned a few minutes later with a tall, thin man, with yellow teeth. He was carrying a gun.

"You're the boy's father?" The man asked. Skinner hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes. You're the man who set dogs on my son?" He asked, his expression furious.

"He was on Mr. Cator's land." The man shrugged.

"And that's an excuse to hunt him down like an animal?" Skinner demanded.

The man shrugged again. "The boy shouldn't have been here," he replied. "I could have left the dogs to tear him apart. Be grateful that I didn't."

"You bastard. I'll make sure Mr. Cator hears about this." Skinner growled. The man just shrugged again.

"He don't care much." He grinned, showing those yellow teeth. "Now I suggest you take your pup and get him off this land before sundown, or maybe I'll let my dogs loose on you, too."

"I'd strangle them with my bare hands if you did," Skinner told him, "and then I'd turn my attention to you."

The gamekeeper paled for a moment, and then deliberately slammed some bullets into his gun.

"Just be leaving, and there won't be any trouble," he said.

"The boy's ill! He can't be moved." Skinner protested.

"Maybe you don't understand." The gamekeeper moved his gun menacingly. "You, and the boy, and the pretty lady are gonna leave. Now. Although..." he leered at Scully. "I reckon the pretty lady could stay if she wanted."

The gamekeeper barely saw Skinner's fist as it shot out and caught him square on the jaw, sending him flying. Skinner grabbed the man's gun from his hands as he went down, and then stood over him, a look of utter contempt on his face.

"If we ever meet again, off this land, then I'll finish the job," he said, in a low, quiet growl.

"Nobody does this to my boy and gets away with it, understood?" He threw the gun into the hay, and turned back to Scully and Mulder. "All right, Fox, we need to get you to the buggy."

Can you put your arms around my neck?" He asked. Mulder nodded, weakly, and Skinner crouched beside him, and picked him up. Mulder winced, and buried his face in the man's shoulder, every muscle in his body aching, and his ankle hurting so much that he almost passed out. "All right, son. Hold on," Skinner said, striding out to the buggy with Mulder. Scully climbed into the buggy and helped Skinner to get in beside her. There was only room for two passengers, so Mulder remained in Skinner's lap, the two of them crushed into the small seat. Scully gave Skinner the blanket she kept in the buggy, and he wrapped it around the shivering boy, and held him close. Mulder closed his eyes, and tried to forget the pain in his ankle, and his aching body. He rested his head against Skinner's chest, and Scully began the slow, jolting drive back home.

Mulder didn't remember much about the next few days. He remembered that the journey home had taken forever, and he remembered that it had been dark by the time Skinner had lifted him down from the buggy, and carried him into the house. He remembered being placed on his bed, and undressed, and Scully's gentle fingers examining his ankle, and bruised ribs. At some point his sprained wrist and cut head had been bandaged, and his broken ankle had been set with a splint, but he didn't remember that. The next thing he remembered was Skinner standing over him, looking down, and then sitting beside him, wiping his sweaty forehead with a cool washcloth. He knew that he was feverish, and that he cried out a lot, and occasionally he was wrapped in a blanket and held in a pair of big, muscled arms while his sweat-soaked sheets were changed. He woke up briefly, and saw Mrs. Scully sitting beside him, knitting, and he remembered crying out for Skinner. As soon as the big man came to sit at his bedside, he immediately fell asleep again.

At some point his chest felt so tight that he couldn't breathe. He coughed and coughed until his whole body ached, but he still felt as if he were drowning. In a moment of clarity, he saw Skinner's grave, serious face, and watched Scully shake her head, and whisper the word 'pneumonia.' The big man was angry for a moment, and paced the small room. Mulder wanted to comfort him, but he couldn't move.

"I won't watch it happen again, feeling so damn useless." Skinner snapped to Scully. She placed a gentle hand on his arm, and gazed at him sympathetically. Mulder watched in amazement as Skinner's eyes filled with tears, and he turned away and left the house. Mulder couldn't be sure, but he thought it was some time before Skinner returned. When he did, he seemed to have regained his composure, and radiated a new sense of calm and purpose.

"I have other patients," Dr Scully told the big man. "I'll be back. In the meantime - he's having trouble breathing. The fact that he's lying down doesn't help - the fluid just gathers on his lungs. Keep him sitting up as much as possible."

Skinner nodded, and Mulder watched as Scully kissed the big man's cheek gently.

"Let's just pray that he pulls through," Scully told him as she packed up her bag and walked towards the door.

"I'll do anything in my power to make him well." Skinner replied, his voice low, and fierce.

"He was so run down, and thin, or the infection wouldn't have caught hold like this." Scully shook her head.

"I know. I looked." Skinner's voice broke slightly. "I looked for weeks, but he just vanished. If only I'd found him sooner, if only I'd woken up that morning, I could have stopped him..."

"It wasn't your fault." Scully said firmly. "Regrets and recriminations won't get you anywhere. Please don't fall into that trap again, Walter." Skinner nodded, gazing at his feet, but Scully placed her hand under his chin and made him look at her. "I mean it. Just concentrate on getting Fox well again."

"I will." Skinner nodded, and opened the door for her. "Dana - thanks for your help."

"You're welcome, as always."

Skinner closed the door behind his guest, then returned to Mulder's bedside.

"Ah - you're awake." He smiled down at the boy. Mulder opened his mouth to say something, but his tongue was stiff. He started to cough. "Easy." Skinner held him up, as the coughs spasmed through Mulder's frail body. Skinner placed even more pillows behind Mulder's head and shoulders, until the boy was almost sitting. "Get some rest, Fox." Skinner smoothed Mulder's hair, then got up to go. Mulder made a faint noise of protest, and Skinner came back.

"Stay." Mulder whispered, his voice rasping. Skinner obliged, sitting on Mulder's bed for several long hours. Every time he tried to leave, Mulder protested, until finally Skinner got up and stretched.

"I'll get a sore back sitting like this," he said, with a wry grin. "I have a better idea." He leaned over the bed, and wrapped Mulder up in a blanket, and then he picked the boy up in his arms and walked him over to the rocking chair in front of the fire. Skinner sat down and arranged Mulder so that he was sitting comfortably in his lap. Mulder laid his head against the big man's chest, and closed his eyes.

When he awoke again it was dark. The fire still glowed, and Skinner was still rocking the chair. Mulder stirred, and Skinner looked down on him, then wordlessly reached for the cup of water that was on the floor beside him, and held it to Mulder's lips. Mulder drank, then sank back listlessly against the big man's chest.

"I used to live in another world." Mulder murmured.

"Uh-huh." Skinner nodded, smoothing Mulder's hair aimlessly.

"Scully was there. I was tall - taller than I am now."

"Hmmm." Skinner carried on rocking. Mulder gazed into the distance, seeing that half-remembered world, so close that he could almost touch it.

"She was my partner. We used to do things together. Go out hunting for...monsters."
Mulder looked up at the big man, and Skinner nodded.

"Monsters. Yes," he said, his fingers still soothing Mulder's hair.

"You were there, too." Mulder mumbled.

"Was I?" Skinner smiled.

"Yes. You were a bit older, I think, and you didn't dress like this."

"Was I a farmer, or did I go hunting for monsters too?" Skinner asked, one big arm keeping Mulder upright, and nestled safely against him.

"No, not a farmer..." Mulder frowned. "You had a desk. You worked in an office. A big office. You were important."

"Hmmm, I'm not sure I'd like to work in an office," Skinner commented, with a wry smile.

Mulder smiled back. "I'm not sure you did, now I think about it. You growled a lot."

"I'm not surprised. Being cooped up all day." Skinner shuddered. "I must have been a bear with a sore head."

"Yeah. You were." Mulder closed his eyes again, and saw a world he could only dimly remember.

"What was I to you there?" Skinner asked. "A friend? A father?"

"I don't know." Mulder shook his head. "I think...we worked together. I was big," he said again. "I wasn't like this. My sister disappeared..." His voice broke off, and he was aware of something wet falling down his cheeks.

"Hush - it isn't real." Skinner hugged him close, using the tip of the blanket to wipe away the tears. Mulder bit on his lip, and snuggled his head against Skinner's shoulder.

"I don't want it to be," he whispered. "I want this to be real."

"This **is** real," Skinner said. Mulder smiled, and closed his eyes again.

When he next woke up, he was in bed again. His head was pounding, and he was shivering. A few minutes later, Skinner came and sat on the edge of the bed, holding a bowl.

"This is some broth. You need nourishment," Skinner said. Mulder shook his head and turned his face away, having no appetite. Skinner reached out and turned it back again.

"No arguments," Skinner said firmly. "Just eat."

Mulder considered keeping his mouth closed, like a mutinous two-year-old, but there was no resisting the look in Skinner's dark eyes, so he reluctantly swallowed down the broth. He felt a bit better afterwards, and asked if he could sit up in the chair again. Skinner nodded, wrapped him in a blanket, and walked with him over to the rocking chair. Mulder felt safe like this, wrapped up, held close, lulled by the motion of the chair, and the warmth and security of Skinner's body.

"What date is it?" He asked.

"October 19th." Skinner replied.

"Oh." Mulder sighed. "I missed my birthday."

"We'll give you another birthday, when you're better. I have a present for you." Skinner told him.

"The one you made?" Mulder looked up, his vision blurring.

"That's right." Mulder felt Skinner push the hair out of his eyes. "I'll cut your hair for you too." Skinner smiled. "It's grown pretty long."

"I should get back. Scully will be missing me," Mulder murmured.

"She visits you every day!" Skinner exclaimed.

"My Scully will be missing me. I had my own apartment." Mulder informed him sleepily. Skinner looked down, his expression anxious. Mulder felt a wave of pain spasm through his body, and he gave in to a fit of racking coughs. He felt too warm, and pushed the blanket aside, the sweat breaking out all over his body, and running down the side of his face.

"You'll be so mad at me for missing work," Mulder muttered. "I need to get back...I need to explain it to you. I left...you were mad at me when I left...I need to apologize...I was such a brat..." Skinner held Mulder tight, resting his chin on the boy's head.

"Let's think of all the things you want to do when you get better," Skinner said. Mulder gazed around. Everything seemed blurry, and he was sure that if he could just close his eyes he would fall asleep, and never wake up. Skinner nudged him. "Fox. Tell me what you want to do when you're better," Skinner repeated insistently.

"Want to ride like you do," Mulder whispered.

"Do you want me to teach you?" Skinner asked. "It's hard work. You've never shown any interest before."

"Want to." Mulder nodded. "Want to ride fast across the hills. Faster than running." He closed his eyes, and imagined riding, then soaring through the sky like an eagle, staying there, forever. Skinner nudged him again.

"What else?" He asked. "Apart from riding."

"Like to visit the city...but I like it here, with you. It was good before. Well, not school," Mulder made a face, "but the rest...was so good." He bit on his lip. "Until I spoiled it."

"You didn't spoil it." Skinner said.

"I have demons." Mulder broke into a fevered grin. "They make me do stuff I shouldn't." His eyes caught sight of the strap hanging on the wall. "Are you going to whip me for running away?" He asked Skinner.

"What? Of course not!" Skinner exclaimed, his expression outraged. "I'm just glad to have you back. You certainly know how to cause the maximum amount of trouble, young man. I went looking for you. I was so worried. I searched and searched for weeks. I can't believe that you were only a few miles away, all this time."

"Must have gone around in circles. I didn't want to go. I just thought..." Mulder began to cough again, and Skinner stroked his back until the spasm passed.

"It's all right. I know," he said. "When Dr. Scully came by the other day, saying she'd been called out to an injured boy found wandering on the Cator land, I just prayed it was you. I sat in her buggy hoping and hoping it was you. I almost couldn't believe it when it was."

"Something's wrong with time," Mulder told him solemnly, "and nothing can go forward again until it's put right. I don't know how to do that. Maybe he knows. In the other world."

"Fox, please..." Skinner whispered hoarsely, pulling him close. "Don't talk like this."

"Melissa would understand," Mulder rambled. "Melissa Ephesian...she's probably here somewhere..." He trailed off, talking to himself, while Skinner just held him tight, rocking them both backwards and forwards.

When Mulder next awoke, he felt cool. The pounding in his head had gone, and he could breathe more easily. He was sitting in the rocking chair, his head resting on several pillows. Weak sunlight filtered through the window, and he could smell food cooking. He saw Skinner standing in the kitchen, whistling softly to himself as he whisked up something in a bowl.

"That smells good," Mulder commented. He tried to get out of the chair and immediately fell over as his weakened muscles and broken ankle all protested at the same time. Skinner ran over and helped him up.

"You must be feeling better if you're hungry." Skinner grinned. "I've had to force food down your throat for the past couple of weeks. Did anybody ever tell you that you're a lousy patient?"

"Um, I think they did, yes." Mulder grinned back. "Does this mean I'm going to get better?" he asked, as Skinner carried him over to the table, and went to get him a plate of food.

"It certainly looks that way," Skinner replied, placing the plate in front of him. Mulder attacked it with the gusto of the truly ravenous.

Mulder's condition improved dramatically in the next few days. When he complained of boredom, Skinner wrapped him up in a blanket and took him outside. He sat him on the horse and led him slowly around the farm. Sometimes he read to his invalid, and Mulder came to love the sound of that low, deep voice, lulling and soothing him.

"You're good at this," he murmured when Skinner paused for breath. Skinner laughed.

"I've had plenty of practice. All of my children used to love being read to when they were younger. I've never had to read to a fifteen year old before, and the books are a bit different to the ones I read to my boys when they were small, but the technique is still the same."

"What happened to them?" Mulder asked quietly, then wished he hadn't. An expression of intense pain passed across Skinner's face, and he got up.

"I'm sorry." Mulder whispered. "I shouldn't have asked."

"It's okay." Skinner rubbed a weary hand over his forehead, and took a deep breath. "Why did you run away, Fox?" He asked, unexpectedly.

"I said in my note. The crops...the hailstorm...it wasn't fair to expect you to pay for my keep..." Mulder shrugged.

"No. The real reason." Skinner looked down at him intently. "Was it me? Was I cruel to you?"

"No. Never!" Mulder looked up in surprise. "You were too nice. I liked it here too much. I felt like I belonged for the first time - for the first time anywhere, but I was nothing but trouble. I always am, wherever I go...I didn't want to cause problems for you..." A sudden fit of coughing overtook him, and Skinner passed him a cup of water, then sat back down beside him.

"Is there anything else? Were you scared I'd drink again?" He asked.

"No...maybe a little." Mulder admitted. "I..." He hesitated.

"Go on." Skinner said gently.

"I had a dream that you killed them when you were drunk." Mulder said, shame-faced.

"Them? My family?" Skinner inhaled sharply, then exhaled again.

"Yes. I know that's not true, but sometimes I wonder what happened to them - you seem to blame yourself."

"I do. It was my fault." Skinner glanced down at his hands, and then up at the ceiling. "I should have told you before, but I never talk about it. It hurts too much. Maybe there hasn't been enough trust between us, Fox. If I talk about this, will you promise to talk to me about the things that hurt you, rather than just running off?"

"Yes." Mulder nodded. "Yes. I promise."

"All right then." Skinner took another deep breath, then looked Mulder in the eye. "Five years ago, the farm was doing well. I wanted to buy another horse - my old mare was so slow I could walk around the farm quicker than she could. There's a big stable, run by an Irishman called O'Neal, over near Jonestown. I decided to go and see what he had to sell. Sharon told me not to go - she'd heard there was some kind of sickness in Jonestown - but I didn't intend to actually go into the town, so I ignored her. I found the horse I wanted. I was so busy looking the animal over that I didn't take any notice of the groom's cough - or his complaints of a sore throat." Skinner hesitated, and Mulder found himself putting a hand on the other man's arm. "The illness was diphtheria." Skinner looked straight into Mulder's eyes again. "And I brought it home with me. I came down with it first, but look at me - I'm strong enough to fight back. It was touch and go apparently, but I pulled through. When I woke up, I found that my wife and daughter were already dead. I didn't even see them die. They'd fallen ill, died and been buried while I struggled against the disease. Freddie and Ben were still ill. I nursed them day and night, and Dr Scully did all that she could...Ben died first." Skinner's arm was trembling under Mulder's hand. "Pneumonia set in and he just couldn't fight it."

"Oh." Now Mulder understood Skinner's distress when Scully had diagnosed his own pneumonia.

"I buried him next to his mother and sister. Freddie...Freddie seemed to pull through. He wasn't the cheeky boy I'd known - he'd lost a lot of weight, and he was listless, but I thought he'd toughen up again. We became very close, and then suddenly..." Skinner hesitated again, and looked at Mulder, as if for reassurance. Mulder tightened his hand around the man's arm. "Suddenly he just went downhill. Dana said afterwards that she'd seen this before. It's as if the heart is just worn out by the illness and suddenly it gives up. That's what happened to Freddie. I buried him with the rest of my family. All gone - in the space of four months. One moment I'm living here, surrounded by people, laughter, the sounds of children playing, and the next I'm alone, with nothing but my memories. Hell, even the noise Cassie used to make when cutting a tooth would be a pleasure to me now, and that girl sure could make her presence felt." Skinner shook his head, a faint smile on his lips, which soon faded. He cleared his throat. "When you came...when I just **found** you, on my property, with no memory, and nowhere to go - I felt as if I'd been given a second chance. I blew the first one through my own arrogance and selfishness."

"It wasn't your fault." Mulder told the big man, shaking his head. "You couldn't have foreseen it."

"I should have listened to Sharon. If I had, she'd still be alive."

"You don't know that!" Mulder protested. "She could have still got sick. Please, don't blame yourself any more."

"I'll always blame myself." Skinner said softly, and Mulder knew that nothing he could do or say would change that. "I live with it better now than I used to." Skinner admitted. "I barely left the farm for the first couple of years after...and I won't go to church. I won't pray to a god who allowed my family to die."

"Have you ever thought about reincarnation?" Mulder asked.

Skinner frowned. "Being born over again?" He asked. "No, I can't say that I have."

"Well it might happen. You might meet Sharon and marry her all over again, in a different time and place."

"Now you're talking like you did when you were ill." Skinner gave a wry smile. "But thank you. It's a nice thought. I hope I'll do things better next time around."

Mulder shrugged off the cold shiver of foreboding that passed through him. "One day it'll work out right," he said, crossing his fingers.

"I hope so." Skinner smiled then shook his head. "I miss being called 'Pa'," he said with a sigh.

"I could call you 'Pa'." Mulder said, then bit on his lip. "I mean...I never know what to call you. What I said earlier, about running away - I wanted to stay, I wanted to belong, but I knew that I didn't, not really. I'm not really your son, and this isn't really my home. I suppose I just felt I should go out and look for something of my own."

"There was no need. You already have that here." Skinner pulled him into a hug. "I'd be honored if you'd call me 'pa'," he whispered.

"I will then!" Mulder broke into a delighted smile. "Pa." He tested it out and found that it sounded fine, better than fine. It sounded **right**. "I'll save 'sir' for when I'm in trouble," he grinned.

Skinner tousled his hair. "Let's hope that's not **too** often," he grinned back.

Mulder was soon well enough to begin the riding lessons that Skinner had promised him while he was sick. He wasn't exactly a natural, but Skinner was a good teacher, and Mulder soon learned. He came to love riding around the farm and through the hills, his body almost merging with that of the horse, making him feel wild and free. He came home after one such gallop to find Dr. Scully's buggy in the yard, and he burst through the door, eager to greet her, only to find the house full of people. Daniel was there, and Mrs. Scully - Skinner of course, and the diminutive figure of the doctor. Mulder looked around in surprise.

"I thought it was time to celebrate that birthday." Skinner grinned, gesturing to the table that was laden with food, including a large birthday cake. Mulder stared, feeling a lump in

his throat, and wondering how Skinner had afforded this, but he was soon surrounded by people and he wasn't speechless for long.

"I don't remember a birthday ever being this good." Mulder said later, as he slipped into bed.

"Really?" Skinner looked down at him, shaking his head. "I don't know what kind of life you lead before you wound up with me, but I'm glad you're no longer leading it, Fox."

"Me too." Mulder grinned. "But...how did you afford it? You shouldn't have wasted money on me."

"Don't be an idiot." Skinner grinned. "The Scullys contributed - they're very fond of you, and...well, I swallowed my pride when you were ill, and sent word to my family back east. They're not rich, but I'd told them all about you in many letters, and they were anxious to help."

"You have family?" Mulder was curious.

"Of course! My mother and father are still alive - they live in Boston now. They're dying to meet you, but it's a long way to go, and not much chance of us ever being able to afford it."

"I didn't know." Mulder mused on this.

"Well, maybe I should have said, but the topic never exactly came up." Skinner shrugged.

"You hated asking them for money, didn't you?" Mulder asked.

"Yes." Skinner shook his head. "But you were ill, and I couldn't work while I was taking care of you. They're good folks and they wanted to help. My pride was only a little bit dented." He grinned. "Now - I saved this until we were alone together." Skinner went over to the door and opened it, bringing in something covered in a blanket. He placed it on Mulder's lap. "This is what I made you. I hope you like it."

Mulder opened the present reverently, savoring the moment. He didn't remember ever feeling so special before in his entire life. Inside the blanket was an intricately carved wooden box, with hinged sides. Mulder ran his fingers over the box, and saw that it was decorated with images of foxes - running, playing, sleeping.

"It's beautiful," he whispered, glancing up at Skinner.

"I know you don't have much to put in it right now, but everyone needs a private place to keep things. There's a lock on it." Skinner pointed, and handed Mulder a tiny silver key. Mulder opened the box and gazed inside at the padded velvet interior. He dimly remembered a time when presents were more expensive and impressive than this simple wooden box, but he didn't ever recall receiving a gift that meant more to him.

"Thank you," he said, lowering his head, and hoping that Skinner hadn't seen that his eyes were full of tears.

"There's something else," Skinner said. "You've enjoyed riding so much, that I thought you might like a chance to work with some real horses - racehorses. I rode over to O'Neal's stables last week, and he says you can work there on Saturdays, if you want. He'll pay you. It'd be good for you to make some money of your own. It's only if you want to do it, though. I just thought you might enjoy it.

"I'd love to." Mulder replied, still fingering the wooden box. "When do I start?"

"Next week." Skinner grinned. "O'Neal's got a temper on him, like all the Irish, but he's a good man, and a damn fine rider. His horses are the best in the county. Work hard and show willing, and he might let you ride one of his racehorses."

Mulder glanced up, his eyes shining. Ever since he had been ill, he had harbored a fantasy of flying through the air, or riding a horse at great speed. To get a chance to ride a racehorse was a dream come true. Skinner saw that he was overwhelmed, and pulled him into a rough hug, partly to hide the fact that he was tearing up too.

"Time you were asleep," he mumbled gruffly.

O'Neal was a small man, who talked non-stop, but he was a good employer. He took Mulder under his wing, and soon the two of them were firm friends. Mulder looked forward to his time spent at the Irishman's stables all week, and couldn't wait to ride over there on Saturdays. He missed spending time with Skinner at the weekend, but he loved seeing the sleek racehorses being put through their paces. O'Neal raced the horses at local meets, and sometimes travelled further afield with them. He also bred the finest horses in that part of the world, and people came from far and wide to buy them. Mulder's favorite was a black stallion called Midnight, and he would spend hours just watching the horse being put through his paces. Sometimes he dreamed of being able to ride the racehorse, the animal's powerful muscles eating up the ground, until Mulder floated through the air, just like he dreamed. He seemed to remember a different time and place, where he had looked out of a tiny window and seen the clouds beneath him, and he remembered a little girl with braids who had been taken away into the sky. Mulder wanted to follow her.

Mulder was busy rubbing Midnight down one afternoon, when he tensed, smelling smoke and hearing a voice that was somehow familiar to him. He looked up and saw O'Neal showing a man around the stables.

"This horse might be just what you're looking for, Mr. Cator," the Irishman said, ushering the stranger into Midnight's stall. Mulder clenched his fists.

"You're selling Midnight?" he asked, his heart pounding.

"If Mr. Cator wants him, then yes." O'Neal grinned at him. Mulder looked at the stranger, and his heart beat even faster. The man was tall - taller even than Skinner, but older, with a lined, sagging face, and yellowed, smoke-stained hair. He held a cigar in his black-gloved

fingers, and Mulder was afraid of him. He remembered the name too - Cator. The man whose land he had been found on - the man whose dogs had almost torn him to shreds. Cator glanced at Mulder, then glanced at the horse, but his sinister gaze returned to Mulder.

"Do I know you, boy?" He asked, frowning.

"I don't think so, sir." Mulder swallowed, not wanting to remind the man of the incident on his property.

"You seem familiar." Cator mused.

"He's Walter Skinner's boy - and a good worker." O'Neal smiled broadly.

"What's your name?" Cator asked.

"Fox," Mulder mumbled. Cator froze, then took another drag on his cigar, looking thoughtful.

"Fox, hmm? An unusual name. And you say that you're Walter Skinner's boy?" He questioned.

"Yes, sir."

Mulder watched as Cator ran his hands over the stallion. He could tell that Midnight didn't like the smoking man either. Mulder crossed his fingers behind his back, hoping against hope that Cator would choose not to buy the stallion. At last, Cator finished his inspection.

"A fine animal, but not quite what I'm looking for," he said. Mulder breathed a sigh of relief, but his joy was short-lived as Cator glanced directly at him. Something about his stare made Mulder feel uneasy, and he was relieved when the man left.

Mulder became more and more concerned that O'Neal would sell his favorite horse. He longed to ride the animal, but O'Neal was adamant that he improve his riding skills first, and gave him several lessons on the other horses in the stables. It wasn't enough for Mulder. He wanted to ride Midnight, and he wanted to ride the horse before it was too late, and the animal was sold. Finally he came up with a plan. He thought about it for several days, but once it was in his head he couldn't forget about it - he had to put it into action.

He left the house early one Saturday, and rode to the stables. It wasn't yet dawn, and nobody was awake. Mulder saddled up Midnight quietly, and then led the horse away from the house. He took the horse far enough away from the stables that his hooves wouldn't be heard, and then mounted the animal. Midnight pranced around, doing some high steps, showing off, and Mulder soothed him. He dug his heels gently into the horse's flanks and the animal responded immediately, taking off at a long, effortlessly graceful gallop. Mulder couldn't believe how fast the horse was, and soon he was urging him on, to greater speeds. They rode over the prairie for an hour or more, when Mulder noticed that the sun was rising, and they were a long way from the stables. He turned the horse back, hoping that he could get him back to his stall and rubbed down before anyone woke up. It was a long

journey though, and Mulder had to urge the horse to gallop as fast as he could in the hope of making it in time. They were nearly there, when Mulder felt Midnight stumble, and falter beneath him.

"What is it, boy?" Mulder swung himself out of the saddle, and saw that the horse was lame. Cursing his luck, he led Midnight the rest of the way, and breathed a sigh of relief to find that the stables were still in darkness. He returned the animal to his stall and rubbed him down, giving him a long drink, but he was worried sick by the horse's lameness. He picked up Midnight's wounded leg, and examined it, seeing that it was slightly swollen, and hoped that it was temporary, and the horse would soon recover, but he knew he couldn't just leave it like that. When O'Neal came into the yard, he screwed up all his courage and went and told the Irishman that there appeared to be something wrong with Midnight.

"What the hell happened to him?" O'Neal mused, examining the horse.

"I don't know," Mulder mumbled. "He was just like this when I got here."

"Well, I expect he'll mend, but he'll miss the race next week which is a shame. I was kind of counting on this fella to clean up for us there." O'Neal patted the horse's flank. "I don't see how he could have gotten an injury like this standing in his stall all night. You're sure you don't know how it happened?" O'Neal looked at Mulder keenly, but Mulder just shook his head.

"No, sir," he whispered. "I have no idea."

"Hmm." O'Neal frowned. "Well, I'll get someone in to take a look at him."

Mulder breathed a sigh of relief. O'Neal seemed to have bought his story about the horse, and no real harm had been done after all. The sick feeling in his stomach went away, and he resumed his work more cheerfully.

Mulder was out in the yard doing his chores the next day, when he heard the clattering of hooves. He looked up, and his heart sank. O'Neal was riding into the yard.

"It's O'Neal." Skinner glanced at Mulder in surprise. "What's he doing here? You haven't gotten into any mischief have you, Fox?" He teased. Mulder paled, and shook his head.

"No, sir," he muttered.

Skinner glanced at him more keenly, then walked across the yard to greet their visitor. "Is this a social call?" He smiled.

"No, I'm sorry, Walter, it isn't." O'Neal replied, looking directly at Mulder. "One of my horses was injured yesterday. I think he was taken out for a ride without my permission. He'll be out of action for a good couple of weeks."

"I see." Skinner stood there, working this through in his head. "What does this have to do with us?" He asked.

"I think young Fox here took him out for a ride before work yesterday." O'Neal glanced down at Fox. "It's the only thing that makes sense to me."

"Did you, Fox?" Skinner asked quietly, turning to the boy. Mulder looked into the big man's serious dark eyes, and made a quick decision.

"No, sir," he said.

"Well, I think that's a lie, lad," the Irishman said, shaking his head, "and I'm disappointed in you, Fox. I thought we were friends."

"If Fox says he didn't do it, then that's good enough for me." Skinner stated firmly, clapping a hand on Mulder's shoulder. Mulder felt a sick anxiety creep into his stomach again.

"Well I'm sorry, Walter. I don't think your boy is being honest with us." O'Neal replied.

Skinner considered this for a moment, and then led Mulder a few steps away. "Fox," he said quickly, in a soft undertone, "if you're telling the truth I'll defend you to the hilt, but first of all you have to tell me that by doing so I'm not making a liar of myself." He gazed at Mulder intently. "I'm going to ask you again whether you took that horse out and got him injured, and I want an honest reply."

Mulder felt as if time was stopping, as if everything was zeroing in on this one moment. Should he lie? More importantly, could he get away with lying? He looked at Skinner's earnest face, and knew that he couldn't face watching the big man defend him against accusations that were the truth.

"Did you do what O'Neal accuses you of?" Skinner asked.

Mulder nodded, flushing bright red. "Yes, sir," he whispered.

"You took the horse out, and when you got him injured you didn't tell anyone how it happened? You lied to Mr O'Neal, **and** to me?" Skinner asked, his face furious. Mulder felt himself quaking in his boots.

"Yes, sir," he whispered again. Skinner clamped a big hand down on Mulder's shoulder, and propelled him back to where O'Neal was waiting, still seated on his horse.

"It would appear that you're right, Seamus. My apologies for my boy's actions."

"That's all right, Walter. He's been a good worker, but I can't have a liar working for me, y'understand? The boy's lost his job, and I hope you'll see that he's well punished."

"I will." Skinner nodded. Mulder squirmed.

"If he hadn't lied I'd have kept him on. I always liked the lad."

"I understand." Skinner nodded. "Fox - go and get my strap," he ordered. Mulder stood there for a moment, not wanting to obey. O'Neal chuckled, and shook his head.

"Run along, laddie, and do as your pa says. It'll be over quicker that way," he said, with a wink. Mulder chewed on his lip, and finally turned on his heel and walked slowly back into the house. He took the hated strap off the hook and shuddered, remembering his last whipping all too vividly. He began walking back outside, to where Skinner was still talking with O'Neal, but his footsteps got slower and slower until he finally stopped. Skinner turned around and saw him, beckoning him impatiently, and suddenly, without thinking, Mulder dropped the strap and began to run.

He ran fast, knowing even as he did so that this had to be a really bad mistake. A few seconds later he heard the sound of a horse's hooves behind him, and then he felt himself picked up by the scruff of his neck and thrown unceremoniously over the front of O'Neal's saddle.

"Now you're going to be thrashed, laddie, so I'd take it with good grace if I were you." O'Neal chuckled, holding him tight and trotting back to where Skinner was waiting, holding the strap. Mulder's heart sank in dread. "It's not as if you don't deserve it." O'Neal told him, plucking him off the saddle, and handing him bodily to Skinner.

"I'll leave this young rascal to you! I wouldn't like to be in your shoes right now, Fox, laddie!" O'Neal winked and turned his horse around, galloping out of sight.

Mulder's feet didn't touch the ground. Skinner placed one foot on the low wall, and threw Mulder over his knee, yanking his pants and shorts down with one hand, while his other held Mulder steady. Mulder began to struggle and yell, but Skinner was too angry to be thwarted, and the strap rose and fell, planting 6 red hot welts across Mulder's wriggling buttocks in quick succession.

"Ow...stop! Stop...it hurts!" Mulder yelled.

"Like that poor animal hurt." Skinner replied tersely, bringing the strap down again another half a dozen times with vicious precision. Mulder began to sob, as each blow hit its target.

"Unnnh! Owwww! I'm sorry..." He cried. Skinner replaced him on the ground, and looked into Mulder's tear-stained face.

"Inside." He said, gesturing to the house. He stalked back, and Mulder adjusted his clothing, standing by the wall, uncertainly. He hadn't been whipped as hard as he was expecting, and he wasn't sure why Skinner wanted him to return to the house. Skinner paused at the door, and turned around, frowning when he saw that Mulder hadn't obeyed him. He beckoned slowly with his finger.

"Now, Fox!" He boomed. Mulder started, and immediately hurried over to the big man, sidling past him, scared of receiving another swat on his tender backside. Much to his relief, Skinner replaced the strap on the wall. "I am extremely angry with you," Skinner told him. Mulder shrank in size almost visibly at the big man's words.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"No you're not. You're just sorry you got caught." Skinner snapped tersely. "I thought you were better than that. Now, the whipping I just gave you is for behaving like a coward, and showing me up like that in front of O'Neal. Running off..." Skinner shook his head, clearly outraged by such behavior. "The least you could have done was to accept the punishment you earned for yourself. I'm not prepared to let this pass, Fox. Maybe I haven't spent enough time with you recently, but you're clearly running wild and I won't tolerate it. I'm going to do something to you that my pa did to me many years ago - and trust me, it's not a lesson I forgot in a hurry."

"What, sir?" Mulder asked, his throat dry.

"I'm going to spank you every night before bed this week - as punishment for lying to me today. Oh, don't worry, I won't use the strap. You can bend over my knee for a reminder of what my hand feels like on your backside. This time next week, I'll ask you again to bring me the strap. **Then** I'll give you the strapping you earned for what you did to that poor animal, and for disobeying Mr. O'Neal. Is that clear?"

Mulder stared at the big man, aghast. Seven nights of spankings and then a strapping to look forward to next Sunday? How on earth was he going to survive **that**?

"I asked if that was clear." Skinner boomed, ominously.

"Yes, sir." Mulder bowed his head to the inevitable, his heart quaking, and wished that he could turn back time. If only he hadn't run away, if he'd just taken his punishment then and there it would all be over by now, and he wouldn't be facing this week of agony.

"Good. Now go and set about your chores, Fox."

Mulder hesitated, wanting Skinner not to still be angry with him, but the big man's face was darkly furious, so finally he turned and did as he was told.

Supper was a dismal affair, conducted in silence. Mulder didn't dare say anything, and Skinner clearly wasn't in the mood for conversation. After supper Mulder did some homework, until Skinner finally glanced at his pocket watch, and then looked over to him.

"Time you were in bed," he said. Mulder nodded, and began clearing away his books. "Change into your nightshirt, and then come back out here," Skinner ordered. Mulder nodded again, his heart sinking. He realised that he had somehow been hoping that Skinner wouldn't carry through on his threat this evening, but it was clear there was to be no reprieve. Mulder changed into his loose nightshirt, and then returned to where Skinner was sitting, in his usual chair in front of the fire.

"Come here." Skinner beckoned, pointing at his lap. Mulder bit his lip, chewing frantically, but finally obeyed, and felt himself pulled down over Skinner's knee. He yelped, as he toppled forward, and flailed out with his arms, but Skinner held him firmly in place. Mulder felt his nightshirt lifted, and then Skinner's hand blistered down on his bare backside. It

didn't hurt as much as the strap, but Mulder's face was bright red from the humiliation of it, and he clung on for grim life as that hand whacked down a few more swats. He cried out, and buried his face in the side of Skinner's leg, as much from embarrassment as anything else. A small part of his mind still held the memory of being an adult, and being subjected to this kind of punishment was more than he could bear.

When it was over, Skinner placed him back on his feet again, and gestured with his head in the direction of Mulder's bed. Mulder went, wordlessly. He lay on his stomach, and then the tears came - not so much because of being spanked like the child he was, but because he hated the silence between himself and the big man. He sobbed silently into his pillow, then took a series of hitching breaths, and a few moments later he heard Skinner coming over. Mulder felt him sit down on the bed beside him, and then the big man's hand soothed his hair, gently.

"Come on, now." Skinner murmured. "It's not **so** bad, Fox." Mulder sat up, and buried his face in Skinner's stomach, sobbing some more.

"I hate it when you're mad at me," he stammered, between hiccups.

"Well don't do anything to **make** me mad then." Skinner replied, reasonably.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think anyone would find out. I didn't want to be whipped," Mulder muttered almost incomprehensibly. Skinner sighed, and soothed his hair, hugging the boy. Mulder wrapped his arms around Skinner's waist, wanting to know that everything was okay.

"I know," Skinner said, "but you do bring trouble down on yourself, Fox." He smiled wryly, shaking his head.

"Are you still angry with me?" Mulder looked up, his tears framing his eyelashes and making them even darker and longer now that they were wet.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I don't love you," Skinner smiled. "You do understand why I have to punish you though, don't you, Fox?"

"Yes, sir." Mulder nodded, wiping away his tears with the edge of his sleeve.

"Good boy." Skinner smiled. "Time you got some rest. This will be a long week for you, I think."

It was - in fact, Mulder thought that it was the longest week of his entire life. He hated it when Skinner was angry with him, but somehow it was almost worse when Skinner calmed down. They would be laughing over supper, and then Skinner would point to his watch and tell Mulder to get ready for bed, and Mulder's heart would sink at the change in his surrogate father, from joking companion to angry parent. He loathed being over Skinner's knee almost as much as he hated being whipped with the strap.

As the week wore on, Mulder also began to dread what Sunday would bring. He even thought half seriously about hiding the strap, but he was sure that Skinner would find a replacement implement, and wield it even more angrily if the strap had mysteriously gone missing. The bedtime spankings reduced him to tears every night, however hard he tried not to cry. Skinner's always made sure that Mulder's butt was flaming a painful red before he stopped. He also made sure that he gave Mulder a reassuring hug, and kissed his forehead before the boy went to bed. That was the only thing that stopped Mulder crying himself to sleep.

By Thursday, his butt was permanently sore from the repeated spankings, and sitting down was painful. Mulder had been as well behaved as could be all week so far, and he wondered if he could prevail upon the big man not to continue with the punishment. When Skinner nodded his head in the direction of Mulder's bed, Mulder hesitated. Skinner stood there, his head on one side.

"Fox?"

"Please, couldn't you...I mean...I've learned my lesson. Please can't you let me off now?" Mulder asked.

"No, I can't do that, son." Skinner shook his head. "I want you to understand that when you've done wrong, you'll be punished, and that when I say something, I mean it."

"But it isn't fair!" Mulder snapped. He had been pinning his hopes on Skinner agreeing to his request, and he just couldn't bear the thought that he would have to endure three more spankings before Sunday dawned.

"Fox, don't whine at me. Go and get changed for bed, and then get out here." Skinner told him firmly.

"I hate you." Mulder growled, doing as he was told anyway. Skinner shook his head at the boy, but a wry smile tugged at his lips all the same. It was gone by the time Mulder returned.

"Over my knee." Skinner pointed. Mulder stood there, wanting to defy the man. "Fox, make me wait one more second and this will be a spanking that you'll remember for a very long time." Mulder jumped at his tone, and finally walked forward, his face already red with a combination of anger and humiliation. Even so, he couldn't bring himself to actually lie down over Skinner's knee. Instead he just stood there. Finally, Skinner caught hold of his arm in exasperation, and swung him down easily over his knee. Mulder began to yell before the first slap hit home, but Skinner clearly intended this to be a long, painful event, and his big hand peppered Mulder's butt with dozens of swats until Mulder was yelling at the top of his voice.

"Now, will you obey me tomorrow when I ask you to get over my knee?" Skinner asked, as his hand delivered another swat.

"Yes!" Mulder shouted.

"Without throwing a tantrum?"

"Yes, I promise..." Mulder cried, although it was quite possible that he would have agreed to anything by that point.

"Good." Skinner delivered a couple more stinging swats for good measure, then swung Mulder back to his feet again. Mulder stood there, rubbing his sore butt with one hand, and his tear-stained eyes with the other. "Bed." Skinner said firmly. Mulder glared at him, and then stalked off to the curtained alcove that was his bedroom, and slipped under the blankets.

"Do you still hate me?" Skinner asked, as he came to deliver his customary goodnight touse to Mulder's hair.

"Yes." Mulder muttered into his pillow. Skinner sighed. It was definitely proving to be a long week.

Mulder spent the rest of the week in a sulk, and woke up on Sunday in a sullen mood. He spent the best part of the day glaring at the strap, or Skinner, whenever he was in the vicinity of either. Skinner mostly ignored him, and after supper he pushed back his plate, fixed Mulder with a stern look, and then got to his feet.

"I'm going to the barn. I want you to bring the strap and follow me down," he instructed. Mulder bit on his lip, and nodded. He sat there for several minutes after Skinner left, dreading what would happen next, but there was no escaping it so finally he picked up the hated strap and began the slow walk down to the barn.

"I'm glad you could make it this time." Skinner said, taking the strap that Mulder was holding out to him mutely. "Today I'm going to punish you for what you did to that poor horse. I can't tell you how disappointed I am in your actions last week, Fox. That animal suffered because of you, and I think it's only fair that you should suffer in return. You know what to do." He gestured with his head at the bales, and Mulder nodded, his whole body trembling. He quickly pushed down his pants and shorts and bent over the bales, waiting for his whipping. It was mercifully short, but none the harder for all that. Skinner made every stroke count, and the strap whistled fast through the air, landing painfully on his already sore buttocks. Mulder started crying before the third stroke hit home, and he was sobbing piteously by the time the whipping was over. He stood up, still shaking, and buttoned his pants back up. Skinner waited until he was finished, and then held out his arms.

"Come here," he said. Mulder went, and Skinner enveloped him in a hug, holding him tightly while Mulder continued to sob.

"I loved that horse." Mulder wept.

"I know." Skinner sighed, rocking the weeping boy.

"I won't see him again." Mulder's sobs reached a keening fever pitch.

"I know. I'm sorry." Skinner soothed Mulder's hair, and held him for a few moments as Mulder cried over his loss. Finally the boy pulled away, suddenly feeling relieved that the punishments were all over. He looked at Skinner and managed a wry smile.

"Glad to have you back." Skinner said, returning the smile. "Come on." He put an arm around Mulder's shoulder, and led him back to the house. "I have something that I've been saving until this week was out of the way."

"What?" Mulder asked, curious.

"You'll see." Skinner grinned mysteriously.

When they got back to the house, Skinner brought out a big envelope and handed it to Mulder.

"What's this?" Mulder opened it, and looked at the legal papers inside. He glanced up at Skinner questioningly.

"Adoption papers," Skinner told him. "You said you wanted to feel as if you belonged - really belonged - and I thought this might convince you."

"You're going to adopt me?" Mulder was astonished.

"Only if you want me too. It's up to you." Skinner shrugged. "Maybe after this week you'd like to change your mind."

"Are you kidding?" Mulder grinned, shaking his head and then looking at the papers again. "No way! No way!" He got up and threw his arms around the big man, and then did a little dance. Skinner laughed. "What happens next?" Mulder asked.

"Well, we have to go and see a judge, and he'll decide whether the adoption can go ahead. We have to go to court in a few week's time."

Mulder shook his head, wordlessly, glancing at the papers again, and then he took them over to his box, and placed them carefully inside, locking it afterwards.

"I can't wait," he said.

The judge was a kind enough looking man. He listened to them both, and then fixed Mulder with an assessing stare.

"You're sure you don't remember your real family at all?" He asked.

"No, sir." Mulder shook his head.

"And it's been a year since Mr. Skinner found you?"

"Yes, sir." Mulder nodded.

"And nobody has come forward in that time?" The judge glanced at Skinner.

"Nobody." Skinner nodded.

"Well, then I see no reason not to make the boy legally yours." The judge smiled, and signed the papers, and Mulder felt a kind of peace descend on him, permeating his very soul. He was where he belonged, he was sure of that. Skinner pulled him into a bear hug and then they left the courtroom, still grinning. Back home, the Scullys had laid on an impromptu dinner to celebrate, and Mulder didn't think he'd ever smiled so much in his life as he did that evening. His face ached from all the laughing.

It was late when they heard the carriage pull up outside. Skinner opened the door, and Mulder felt an icy hand clutch at his heart as he saw the column of smoke shrouding their unexpected visitor.

"Ah, Mr. Skinner. I'm Theobald Cator." The man held out a black gloved hand, and Skinner took it. "I believe that you have my son."

"What?" Skinner looked at the other man incredulously. "Are you talking about Fox? He's my son. I adopted him this morning."

"Nonetheless, I am his father." Cator glanced over at Mulder, a malicious smile tugging at his lips. "Don't you remember me, Fox?"

"No." Mulder pressed his lips together. "You're not my father."

"But of course I am." The smoking man took a deep inhalation of smoke, then puffed it out again, slowly. "Not your real father perhaps, but when my good friend William died, he left you in my guardianship. I have the papers here to prove it." Cator laid a sheaf of papers on the table. "You can fight me in court if you wish," Cator glanced contemptuously at Skinner, who looked completely stunned, "but there's really no point. You won't win, and I doubt you can afford the legal bill." He smirked as he looked around the tiny house. "It was wrong of you to run away from me, Fox." Cator told the boy. "I was so worried. You've been gone a whole year. I promised my friend that I would do my best by you - see that you got a good education, lived in a fine house. I intend to keep that promise." He looked almost grim as he said it, and Mulder shuddered.

"You can't just come here and take him. I won't give in without a fight," Skinner growled. Cator smiled, a creepy smile.

"You have a week, and then I'll come and collect the boy. One week, Skinner." He grinned, and placed a black gloved hand under Mulder's chin, lifting the boy's head and looking into his eyes. "You'll soon be back where you belong," he murmured.

Mulder felt a shiver creep up his spine.

End of Part Three

Chapter End Notes:

Just to let you know, as I get asked a lot, there aren't any more stories in this series. I'm delighted if you've enjoyed it but I won't be continuing it. It's been nearly ten years since I wrote part three and this muse is definitely long gone!

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