

Switch by Xanthe



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

Story Notes:

Pic courtesy of Bloodrain

Warning: Male rape.

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Part One by Xanthe

Mulder stood outside Skinner's office for a long moment, adjusted his tie, took a deep breath, and knocked.

"Come in." You couldn't tell anything from the tone of voice, but Mulder didn't really need to. When you had made the sort of mistakes he had made over the past week, you had no doubts about being in deep shit. He was surprised to find that the didn't even feel nervous. There were no explanations that would be satisfactory. His job was on the line and that was all there was to it.

"Agent Mulder." Skinner was seated, as ever, behind his desk. He didn't offer Mulder a seat. Instead he just stared at him, as if deep in thought. Mulder found he could not meet that gaze and he looked down at the floor. "This one, Mulder, is big." Skinner said tersely.

"Yes, sir. I know." Mulder squirmed inside.

"Too big." Skinner said. Mulder looked up questioningly, realising that deep inside he had imagined that nothing would be too big for Skinner to save him from. That somehow Skinner would find a way to swing it, to cover it all up, to protect him as he usually did, no matter how much humble pie he had to eat or how many tirades he had to sit through to make that happen. He smelt a sudden whiff of smoke and whirled round. Cancerman was seated in a dark corner of the office, puffing away.

"What Skinner says is right, Mulder." Cancerman smiled. "You've gone too far this time. Who can save you now?"

"Well not you, you son of a bitch!" Mulder rounded on him angrily.

"Who can tell?" Cancerman smiled a sinister smile and stubbed out his cigarette, getting to his feet. "You don't know if it's in my interests to see you go down. And you will go down for this, Mulder, if it reaches....certain ears."

"Sir..." Mulder looked back at Skinner beseechingly. "Please...I was acting..."

"In the best interests of the truth. Yes, we've heard it before, Mulder. Save it. Please." Skinner got up and stared out of the window for a long while. Mulder could almost feel Cancerman's breath on his neck as he stood behind him.

"What's going to happen to me?" Mulder asked at last, scared by the silence, by the grim tension between these two men.

"He'll have to be dealt with." Cancerman lit up another cigarette and crossed over to where Skinner stood. "You can cover it up with my help, but I'll need him dealt with." Skinner stiffened and turned round angrily as if about to say something, then bit his lip.

"Yes," he murmured. Mulder looked from one to the other, fighting a rising sense of panic. "What does 'dealt with' mean?" He asked. Cancerman smiled.

"Punished, Mulder. You can't get away with this."

"I didn't expect to." Mulder shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"And if Skinner covers this up for you, then you get away scot-free don't you?" Cancerman had a creepy smirk on his face. "Skinner can't put anything on your file if he's covering this one up. He can't give you an official reprimand or a punishment detail. Nothing. And so you get away with it. It doesn't seem fair."

"I'll make it up to him." Mulder said, speaking to Cancerman but looking appealingly at Skinner. "I'll do my best from now on. I won't get into any more trouble..." Skinner snorted morosely and carried on staring out of the window. "It's true!" Mulder protested. "I promise. Please..." He hadn't wanted to sound like a child in front of Cancerman, but he was scared. The X Files were at stake, which was close to saying that his life was at stake.

"Then there's me. I know what went on." Cancerman walked up to Mulder and stood close to him, too close. "And I could let your superiors know. Any cover up would require my implicit consent."

Mulder shook his head.

"You're saying I'm finished then?"

"No. Not at all, dear boy." Cancerman shrugged. "I'm saying I want to see you reined in. Brought to heel. Punished." That last word had an edge to it that sent a shiver down Mulder's spine.

"What do you mean?" He asked. "What does he mean?" He addressed himself to Skinner. His boss shrugged, moving away from the window, coming back into the room, adjusting his spectacles.

"He means exactly what he says." Skinner informed him. "It's up to you, Mulder." He shrugged again, frowning deeply.

"Tell me!" Mulder turned back to Cancerman again. The other man took a deep inhalation from his cigarette and blew out languidly.

"Let me tell you a story," he smiled. "About you."

"Me?"

"Yes. As a child. You don't remember me but I saw you a couple of times when you were growing up. I was always rather fond of you. My friend Bill was strict with you wasn't he?"

"Where is this going?" Mulder frowned.

"I remember once he put you over his knee and spanked you after some piece of mischief. That amused me. I often remember that when I see you running around, still getting into mischief."

"You're proposing spanking me?" Mulder asked incredulously.

"Not exactly." Cancerman grinned. "I have certain...specific tastes, dear boy. And you have been asking for certain treatment for a long time. It's my fault I expect. I gave you just a little too much freedom. It's probably time to remind you who runs you."

"Nobody runs me!" Mulder protested.

"Whatever you want to believe." Cancerman waved his hand airily. "So. I have a proposition. Bear in mind that you don't have to accept of course. Nobody's forcing you. But I want to see justice done. I like watching justice being done in fact. I like it very much. And you have pushed your poor boss once too often. Mr Skinner is a patient man, but all the same, he has his limits. I'm sure he wants to see you punished almost as much as I do." Skinner crossed his arms and looked deeply, darkly furious. Mulder quaked.

"So what..." Mulder looked back at Cancerman again, "...is the damn point you're taking so long to get to?"

Cancerman laughed.

"Still he pushes away at our patience! And when he's in so much trouble too!" He gave a delighted smile at Skinner who didn't return it.

"He wants to beat you." Skinner told Mulder tersely. "Or rather, he wants me to. He just wants to watch."

"What?" Mulder was outraged. Skinner shrugged again.

"Like he says, take it or leave it, Mulder. You're in his hands."

"Beat...with your fists?" Mulder had a sudden image of being pummelled by those big hands and flinched involuntarily.

"No, no. Something more subtle." Cancerman smiled. He returned to the dark corner of the room where he had been sitting and drew out a package. "Here." He opened the brown paper and pulled out a long, slim switch. He handed it to Mulder who took it, looking questioningly from Skinner to Cancerman.

"I'm supposed to agree to this?" He ran his fingers over the switch, imagining it biting into his flesh - which part of his anatomy...? Oh god, of course. Cancerman wanted the full works, the full humiliation. "No. It's sick. I can't believe you'd have anything to do with this,"

he said accusingly to his boss.

"It's not my choice, Mulder." Skinner said firmly. "It's yours. I'm just letting him outline the options. I thought you deserved to hear them. It's your future we're discussing."

"My future...rests on one sick pervert's fantasies?" Mulder spat. Cancerman chortled delightedly and Skinner shook his head grimly.

"That's about it, yes," he said. "Think about it, Mulder. Very carefully." Mulder did. He was reeling from this "choice" he had been given. He had seen and heard some bizarre things in his time, but this? It was madness, ludicrous. His belly contracted as his fingers gripped the switch. This would hurt. So would losing the X Files. Could this really be happening to him?

"Alright." He said at last, flushing a deep red. "I agree. There, satisfied now!" He threw the switch down onto Skinner's desk.

"Not yet, dear boy, but I will be." Cancerman grinned. "I always knew you were sensible, Mulder. A little bit of pain, soon over, and then you can go back to your boy scouting around the country, digging up things that should remain buried."

"Mulder...can I have a word?" Skinner crossed the room and put a hand on his shoulder, taking him off into a corner of the office for some privacy. "Mulder, think carefully about this." Skinner said. "Cancerman wants his pound of flesh on this one. If you go through with this...that switch is vicious. It'll cut the skin. I'm not saying this to scare you, but to make you realise that this is not a game or a joke. It's going to be painful, more painful than I think you realise."

"What do you care?" Mulder said angrily, then wished he hadn't as he saw the flash of guilty sadness in Skinner's eyes.

"I couldn't protect you from this." Skinner shrugged. "You made too many mistakes. Cancerman has your ass, Mulder. Literally. But just be aware of what will happen. Be prepared mentally." He put his index finger against Mulder's forehead for a second. "It might help you deal with it."

"How do you deal with something this sick?" Mulder asked him. Skinner sighed.

"You're asking me?" He shook his head. "I'm just trying to help. You don't have to go through with this."

"Yeah, I do. He's got me over a barrel. I can't lose the X Files, sir. I just can't." Mulder shrugged, feeling like his heart would break at the very thought.

"So you're sure this is your choice?" Skinner questioned him.

"Some choice!" Mulder shook his head. "No real choice, but yes."

Skinner nodded and returned to the desk, picking up the switch and turning round. "Alright, Mulder, now you've made your mind up, let's get started." His whole tone and demeanour had changed and he seemed bigger, stronger and quite frightening. Mulder felt a sense of dread. "Get into the next door room. Now." Skinner ordered taking charge of the situation. Cancerman smiled, and Mulder swallowed down his fear and hatred, turning to open the door to the conference room that led off from Skinner's office.

It was a big room, dominated by a large table. Cancerman pulled a chair away from the table and sat himself down. Skinner got hold of Mulder's shoulder and frogmarched him down the other end of the table. "Get your trousers off, Mulder." He ordered peremptorily, turning away and swishing the switch through the air experimentally a couple of times. Mulder flinched at the sound. Slowly he undid his belt and unzipped his trousers, dropping them to his ankles and stepping out of them, flushing furiously. Cancerman licked his lips eagerly and sat back in his chair.

"And your shorts." Cancerman said, taking another cigarette out of the pack.

"What?" Mulder looked outraged.

"Bare skin." Cancerman said. "The skin has to be bare, dear boy, if the switch is to bite properly." Mulder shivered and looked questioningly at Skinner who nodded.

"Quickly, Mulder."

He divested himself of his shorts, grateful that his shirt covered his modesty to a certain extent and then stood there, feeling more exposed and humiliated than he ever had in his life.

"Now bend over the table." Skinner told him tersely. Mulder felt light-headed as he did as he was told, half-heartedly bending forwards. Skinner's hand slammed into the small of his back, pressing him down.

"Right over." Skinner said coldly. Mulder could feel the coolness of the table against his stomach through the thin fabric of his shirt and he reached out with flailing hands.

"Hold the sides, Mulder." Cancerman said, getting up. "Let's get it quite right shall we?" He guided Mulder's hands to the side of the table. "Hold on tight." He smiled. "If your hands go back to stop the blows then I'll have Skinner hit them as well. If you move, or try to get up, I'll have him go on for longer." Mulder could smell the cigarette ash as Cancerman leaned over him to give him these instructions. Then he felt a leg kick him between the knees, until his ankles were some way apart. "That's better." Cancerman whispered. "Yes. I think that's about right, Mr Skinner. You can proceed now."

Cancerman returned to his seat. Mulder wondered about that. Cancerman's chair was at the other end of the table, facing the proceedings. Somehow Mulder thought that wasn't right, that Cancerman would want to see more of the action but then he realised that what Cancerman wanted to see was his reaction, his face. He put his head down against the cool

wood of the table, stifling the whimper of fear he felt in his stomach. He felt Skinner's hand on his back and the switch against his backside, taking aim, then it was raised....a whistling sound and then the most atrocious blaze of pain he had ever felt in his life. Suddenly he regretted his decision, knowing he could not stand this. How many strokes did Cancerman intend to inflict on him? One hurt so much that he could hardly breathe and then almost immediately he had to prepare for the second. That whistling sound again and then the sort of pain that makes you want to jump and scream. He managed to stop himself doing either but his hands felt clammy and sweaty, sliding along the edges of the table as he gripped it to keep himself in the same position. Now he knew why Cancerman had warned him about putting his hands back. It was all he wanted to do. Anything to protect himself.

He heard Skinner grunt as the next blow was delivered and this time he screamed, feeling the sweat running into his hair. Looking up, he saw Cancerman's expression. He was loving this! He was savoring that scream, his pupils dilated with his pleasure. He caught Mulder's eye, and smiled at him. Mulder looked back down, waiting...the next blow knocked all the air out of him. How could he stand much more? The switch was vicious, deeply cutting, almost like a knife. His skin felt as if it had been split open and he found that he was crying. Skinner paused and Mulder tried to rein the sobs back in, biting down on his lip, ignoring Cancerman's lascivious grin of enjoyment.

The next blow forced a yelp from inside him. One more and he lay dazed, a sobbing wreck on the table. Skinner stopped and he sighed with relief. Cancerman got up and wandered over to him.

"Six is traditional of course." Cancerman said to Skinner, surveying the damage. "But I think he can take more. I don't think he's learned his lesson just yet, have you, Mulder?"

"I...please...no more," he whimpered. Cancerman laughed and returned to his seat. "Proceed." He instructed.

Skinner leaned down over Mulder's prone form. "Don't think of the pain, Mulder. Think of hate," he said, smoothing the other man's sweaty hair out from his eyes. "Hate me, or him, or both of us. Hold onto it." Mulder gritted his teeth.

"Why don't you put less effort into it?" He ground out. Skinner snorted.

"He'll know if I do and then it will go on longer," he said. Mulder looked up at Cancerman again and the man grinned, blowing out a puff of smoke.

"Mr Skinner is quite right, Mulder," he said. "I know exactly what I want. He's a wise man, Mr Skinner. Very wise." He stubbed out the cigarette and reached for the pack, pulling out another one, lighting it, grinning at Mulder. "You look distressed, Agent Mulder. I do hope you are learning something from all this."

"Oh yeah. I'm learning something." Mulder spat, thinking about what Skinner had said about hate. The next blow struck before he could say anything else and he sobbed, biting his lip. He imagined the switch going right through him and ending up in Cancerman's face, and

welcomed the next blow, sending it straight to Cancerman, obliterating that evil smile, smashing away those cigarettes...The next stripe made him lose his grip on the table, his sweaty hands sliding away from the edges. He tried to roll sideways, to get up but Skinner's hand knocked him back down, holding him there for a moment.

"Nearly, Mulder." Cancerman smiled. "You nearly broke our rules there, didn't you?"

"Son of a bitch." Mulder managed to rasp out, glad that Skinner was holding him down or else he might have gotten up and taken a swing at the cigarette smoking bastard. He waited expectantly for the next biting swipe of agony and lost control in the wait, swinging one of his hands back to deflect the blow as it came whistling down, sure that he could take the pain anywhere but on his aching, burning butt. The switch cut across his hand with a resounding sting of pain and he gasped. Skinner took hold of his hand and forced it back down to the table.

"Keep them there," he hissed fiercely. Mulder stared at the long red welt on his hand, the skin slightly cut. God knows what his butt must look like if his hand looked like this. He closed his eyes as the next blow fell, sure that he couldn't endure any more, his knees giving way. The next few minutes passed in a haze of unbearable agony and he slumped down, utterly defeated.

"Twelve." Cancerman got up. "Well I think that will do." He stubbed out his cigarette. "I'm sure, Agent Mulder that your behavior will not improve as a result of this little, "discussion". However, it certainly hasn't done you any harm. And of course, I reserve the right to use similar methods in future..." He grinned down at Mulder who lay on the table, exhausted, unable to move, his face soaked in sweat and tears, his whole body on fire. "I'll let you see to the poor boy, Mr Skinner. Be kind to him. He really has suffered." Cancerman smiled and stubbed out his final cigarette, moving quietly to the door and closing it behind him. Mulder fell to the floor, unable to move.

"Come on." Skinner crouched down beside him and pulled him up. "Let's get you dressed again."

"I can dress myself." Mulder protested feebly.

"I don't think so." Skinner helped him into his boxer shorts, carefully easing them over his tortured flesh. Mulder screamed and held onto his boss's shoulders, his fingers digging in.

"Okay. Slowly." Skinner held him up for a moment, then guided his feet into his trousers, fastening them for him as carefully as he could. Mulder stood there for a moment, swaying, all the blood draining away from his head, making him feel faint. He held onto the table and watched as Skinner picked up the switch and, holding it in both hands, brought it down over his knee with a crash, splitting it in two, before chucking it into the waste paper bin.

"You shouldn't have done that." Mulder said. "He might want it back."

"He can have it back. In pieces." Skinner got hold of Mulder's arm and put it round his

shoulders, helping the beaten man back into the other room. "Now sit down and wait here. No, stupid of me. Lean against the wall." Skinner helped him to the wall and then left, returning a few moments later with a glass of water, a wet handkerchief and a tube of something. Mulder downed the drink in one go and gratefully wiped the sweat and tears from his face with the handkerchief. Skinner's face was closed and grim as he watched.

"Well, you probably got to fulfill an ambition today." Mulder told him with a sickly smile. "Finally getting to give me what I'm sure you've always thought I deserved."

"No." Skinner took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes wearily. "I just went along with what you wanted, Mulder. I didn't want to make it any harder for you."

"Seemed like you meant it to me, when you ordered me into that room." Mulder muttered angrily.

"Yes. I didn't want you to worry about anything other than yourself. You didn't need to know how much I was hating it." Skinner told him seriously.

"You..." Mulder thought back. Somehow he had considered Skinner to be part of it, enjoying it maybe, but he saw that he was wrong. Skinner had been as much a victim of the whole thing as he had and he hadn't even screwed up to deserve it. "God, I'm sorry," he said wretchedly. "I never thought...you poor bastard."

"Don't waste your sympathy on me." Skinner shook his head. "You'll survive. I'll survive. But, Mulder, please...please don't ever put us in this position again, okay? Scenes in my office, angry shouting, even your goddamn petulance, I can cope with. But I don't want to go through that again. I don't know what image you have of me, but I'm really not the sort of man who gets off on that kind of thing."

"I am sorry." Mulder muttered, staring at his shoes. "When you said to hate you..."

"I was giving you a way of getting through." Skinner shrugged.

"Yes. I see that. I tried to send every one of those blows to that bastard. I hope he felt them."

"We'll get him. One day. I promise." Skinner said earnestly. "Now here. You should put something on those cuts. I mean it." He held out a tube of medicated antiseptic gel. "They could get infected if you're not careful. The skin was torn a bit. I would suggest that you went to hospital to get them checked out but I'm not sure you'd like all the explanations you'd have to give."

"No." Mulder looked at his boss properly for the first time and grinned. "No, I don't think I would much," he said. "But I...can I ask you a favor?"

"After what I just did to you?" Skinner raised an eyebrow. "I'd have said so. Yes."

"Can you help me? It hurts when I move. I'm not sure I can reach. I know it's a lot to ask but hell, after what we've just been through..."

"Alright." Skinner helped him to push down his pants and shorts again and then applied the cool gel to his flaming backside.

"That feels better." Mulder carefully pulled his clothing back on again. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now go home, Mulder. Take a couple of days off. You won't be sitting down at your desk again for a while anyway. If I were you I'd get a few good videos in and lie yourself face down on your couch for the next few days. I'll call to check up on you."

"No need." Mulder said, making his way slowly and carefully to the door. Skinner accompanied him, a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Every need," he said softly. "Every need, Mulder."

Part Two: Oblivion by Xanthe

Mulder lay on his stomach, flicking through the television channels. He felt strange, light-headed. Probably he should have eaten. He tried to watch the television but instead kept running through the images of what had happened to him this evening. The smell of Cancerman's cigarette-fumed breath as he leaned over his prone body, Skinner's anger and disgust with the proceedings, his own helplessness and the pain - god, the pain. He cradled the pillow close to his chest and felt the familiar salty tears running down his face. He had screwed up as usual, only this time the retribution had been swifter, more revolting than anything he could have expected. He should feel traumatised, raped even after what he had just gone through but he didn't...his feelings were more complex than that. This pain was a relief, a relief from his tortured emotions, his own sense of guilt at every damn thing he'd done wrong all his life. When your body hurt you didn't have to think about anything else, you could just go with the pain, a just punishment for a guilty life. It took him to a dark place in his head, somewhere he had always wanted to find but which had so often eluded him. Beaten, abused...there was no pleasure in it, no sexual excitement or satisfaction, but mentally, emotionally...shit, what was going on in his head this time?

The phone interrupted these dark thoughts. He reached out a fumbling hand to pick it up and yelped. That switch had done its job well. His flesh had been tortured with precision, as if by an expert. God that was a sick thought. He hoped Skinner wasn't an expert at this sort of thing.

"Hello." He mumbled into the phone.

"Mulder?" Jeez, talk of the devil.

"Sir."

"I just wanted to check you were okay."

"I'm fine. My ass is twelve different shades of hellfire, I can't move a muscle without crying like a baby and there's crap on TV. Welcome to the wonderful life of Fox Mulder."

"So you're feeling better then?"

"Shit, don't make me laugh." Mulder grimaced into the phone. Now was not the time to discover that his normally taciturn boss had a sense of humor.

"Sorry. At least you're still compos mentis. I was worried you'd slipped into a coma or something."

"Nah. Hey, it was no big deal. Like he said, a little pain, soon over. I probably deserved it." Mulder stopped and bit his lip. The truth was that he believed that.

"Don't be stupid." Skinner's voice sounded angry. "Damn, Mulder but however did Cancerman get this hold on our lives?"

"I don't know, sir. You're the one who gives him office space." Mulder pointed out. There was silence on the other end of the line and he thought maybe he had gone too far then shrugged and winced as the gesture sent a wave of pain through his body. He reckoned he had some leeway with Skinner right now, although how much he couldn't be sure. To be honest he had always been reassured by Skinner's way of standing up to him, showing him where the boundaries were, making it clear that he could only go so far. Without Skinner he would probably have made worse mistakes than he had done so far. Much worse. Ones that might have ended up killing him. He wasn't sure he liked the man, but he did respect him, even after today. Especially after today.

"It's not personal choice." Skinner finally answered his undisguised accusation.

"Whatever. Look I'm fine. I said you didn't have to phone. I'll be alright. Leave me alone." He severed the connection. The tears were rolling down his face again and he welcomed them. This felt good, this felt really good. This was a distraction. He watched the television blankly, his mind going back to the helplessness...at someone else's mercy, out of his control, just accept, accept the just punishment for his sins. All his sins, not just the most recent ones, going right the way back to...right the way back. He felt cleansed.

He fell asleep on the couch and woke 8 hours later, astonished. This was the first proper night's sleep he'd managed for ages. The pain had exhausted him physically and cleaned him out emotionally. He hadn't had the strength to do his usual chewing over the crap that usually overwhelmed him and kept him awake. He looked around the room blearily. The television was still on, mutely flickering away in the background, sunlight was streaming through the windows. He smiled to himself and stretched and then yelped in pain. Damn, how could he have forgotten about it so quickly? Gingerly he eased himself off the couch and walked swiftly to the bathroom, turning the shower on full blast, cold. Cold against his aching, burning flesh, cold and comforting and cleansing. Funny how he kept coming back to that word. Such a distraction, such a relief...the constant pain, the constant nagging ache,

replacing the other ache, the one he'd carried in his heart and mind for so long, pushing it out, keeping it down. This actually felt good. He shaved, pulled on his suit and took himself off to work.

"Agent Mulder?" Skinner stood in the doorway, his expression incredulous. "What are you doing here?"

"Working, sir." Mulder peered at his boss over the top of his glasses as he stood, flicking through a file. Scully looked up. She had been surprised by Mulder's level of nervous energy this morning and his continued refusal to sit down like a normal person. Instead he kept flitting around the office leaning against things, occasionally wincing to himself as if the files he was looking at contained something painful. She had no idea what was going on in his head but that wasn't unusual.

"Yes, I can see that. But why?" Skinner looked angry. Scully wasn't sure what was going on. She knew Mulder had been in bad trouble yesterday but he refused to tell her what the outcome had been. Had Skinner suspended him? Transferred him?

"Because there's work to be done." Mulder looked up innocently and Skinner took a deep breath.

"I thought I told you to take a couple of days off." He frowned.

"You did. I ignored your advice." Mulder grinned. "No point lying around at home while there's stuff to be done here. I'm a glutton for punishment." It was said lightly but Scully noticed the tension between the two of them suddenly skyrocket.

"I'll see you in my office. Ten minutes." Skinner said tersely. Mulder made a face at his boss's disappearing back.

"In trouble again?" Scully asked him. He shrugged and again that strange little wince.

"No. I don't think so." Mulder said softly.

Skinner sat back and scowled at Mulder as the young agent leaned against the wall of his office. He was occupying that space where ironically, Cancerman usually took up position. His eyes had darted towards the adjacent room as he came in, an expression that had not been lost on Skinner.

"Mulder I meant what I said. You're in no condition to be at work. I don't want you here." Skinner told him tersely.

"I'm flattered." Mulder made a face. "But I don't see how you're going to make me go anywhere else," he said. "You can't exactly report this one without opening up the whole debacle of last week and the mess I made of things."

"Don't tell me what I can or can't do!" Skinner said angrily. "You shouldn't be here. You need

time to recover. You took one hell of a beating, Mulder."

"You should know." Mulder said softly, regretting it instantly. "I'm sorry. Out of order."

"I won't be made to feel guilty over this. You were given a choice, Mulder. A sick one, but a choice none the less." Skinner said firmly.

"Yeah. Talking of which, has our cancerous friend delivered the goods?" Mulder asked.

"Oh yes. He's not stupid. If he wants to keep playing games with us he needs to keep us inside." Skinner threw the file down on the corner of the desk nearest to Mulder. "This was sent to me this morning. All tied up, no loose ends, no sign of the mess you made of things. He's a man with a lot of contacts in all the right places."

"How reassuring for us." Mulder only gave the file a cursory glance. "Do you have any idea where we can find him?" He asked, his breath catching in his throat, wondering why he was asking. Skinner had no such doubts, he thought he understood why Mulder was asking.

"No. I have no way of finding the evil son of a bitch and wasting him. Much as I'd like to," he murmured. "Much as you'd like to as well, I guess." He looked at Mulder who nodded.

"Yeah. Of course." But that wasn't what he was thinking. It wasn't anything like what he was thinking. Something was going on deep inside, triggered by events last night, something so dark and evil that he couldn't even begin to look at it or understand it. A compulsion, a need. He took a deep breath. "So, we just wait until he shows up again for another sick little sideshow do we?" He asked lightly. Skinner shook his head.

"No more sideshows, Mulder. I told you that last night," he said.

Mulder bit his lip. You don't understand, he thought. I want to go through that again. Over and over again until all my sins are washed away and if Cancerman was the man who could give him absolution, if he was the one who'd watch over him as he sweated and screamed, decreeing the punishment, laying down the rules, coldly, ruthlessly, then Mulder needed to find him. He needed that absolution bad. He found himself looking questioningly at Skinner, wondering if he'd do instead but knowing it was no use. Skinner had principles, honor, integrity. Skinner wouldn't agree and anyway he couldn't begin to know how to ask him. But Cancerman...give himself up to that bastard, to his oldest, greatest enemy, to a man who seemed to have an unnatural fixation on him, well that was different. What could be a better way to atone for sins than to place yourself willingly into the hands of a man who would abuse you without mercy, who would punish you cruelly, allowing you no comfort or respite? Not someone who might be blinded by convention, or even affection or respect. Someone who was outside the law, outside everything, someone so amoral they'd just deliver what you wanted without asking why you wanted it...Mulder snapped back into reality, realising that Skinner was gazing at him.

"I'm going back to work," he said. "You can't stop me. Sir." He left the office without looking back.

Skinner frowned and returned to his work, but he couldn't concentrate. He got up and went into the conference room next door, saw the shattered remains of the switch and winced. How did anyone live with this? If he could just find out where Cancerman was staying...what would he do? Slip the address to Mulder and let natural justice take over? Go there himself? When had he ever killed anyone in cold blood? Even someone as evil as Cancerman. No, he had to let it go. If only Mulder could do the same. He hadn't liked the expression in Mulder's eyes; faraway, reflecting a strange kind of peace, unreal. Skinner shuddered, remembering something he would have preferred to forget, remembering where he had seen that sort of expression before.

Mulder stared down at the paper in his hands in disbelief. It had been 3 weeks, the cuts had healed and as the days passed he had become more and more sure of what he wanted. He had to track this man down if it was the last thing he did. The usual channels drew a blank as he had known they would. However all this blundering around, searching had yielded an unexpected result. Cancerman had been alerted to him and now he found himself staring down at the slip of paper in his hands.

"Dear boy, if you wanted to find me, you only had to ask." And an address. Mulder pulled on his jeans and a denim shirt, his leather jacket. Then he screwed up the note and threw it into the bin. He knew what he wanted. Why he wanted it was a different matter and not something he cared to go into. He just knew what he wanted.

The road was deserted, leading to an old house set in darkness, surrounded by trees. Mulder got out of the car and walked nervously to the door, knocked, waited for a long agonising minute. The man who opened the door let him in wordlessly. He had been expected. He was taken into a plush drawing room, the atmosphere thick with smoke. There were 2 armchairs, side by side in front of the fire. One of them had an occupant - that much was obvious from the circle of smoke emerging from the chair.

"Come in, dear boy, come in." A hand beckoned him forward, gestured him to a chair. He sat, as instructed, unsure how he was going to say what he wanted to say or to ask for what he wanted to ask for. Cancerman smiled at him, fondly, as if he were a pet. Mulder choked back a wave of nausea, shocked by himself, disbelieving. "So. You wanted to see me?" Cancerman offered him a drink and he shook his head, mutely. "Well?" Cancerman leaned back, taking a sip of his drink and drawing a long puff on his cigarette.

"I...that is..." He closed his eyes. "It's about what you did to me."

"Ah." Cancerman put his drink down and looked for a long time into Mulder's eyes and then he smiled. "You know, I did wonder. I wondered if retribution might be on your mind but now I see you, I realise you have come on a different matter entirely. You're not the first of course. Many people are attracted by what I can give them."

"What you can give?" Mulder was incredulous. "You make a habit of slamming people over tables and beating them?"

"No. Never. I make a habit of watching. That's entirely different." Cancerman smiled. "I like to think of myself as a facilitator, shall we say. I can make things happen. And of course I am untroubled by conscience or morals which makes the matter all the more satisfying for people like you."

"People like me?" Mulder echoed.

"People who need to be relieved of certain...emotions. People who want the guilt taken away." Cancerman blew out a long stream of smoke and regarded Mulder with amused fondness. "And you have always felt the need to have your guilt taken away, Fox."

"Don't call me that." Mulder pulled back.

"Of course I'll call you what I like. You don't make any rules here." Cancerman said sharply. "You don't need to worry. There'll be no responsibility here either. I won't give you a choice. Last time I didn't really give you a choice did I? You didn't even thank me for that."

"You planned this? You thought I'd react this way?" Mulder asked, confused.

"I've known you for a very long time, Fox. I know you very well. Better than you know yourself." Cancerman told him seriously. "And I know what's best for you. Get up." Mulder wanted to disobey but couldn't find the words. He got to his feet.

"Just give me the pain," he whispered. "Make it hurt."

"I will." Cancerman clicked his fingers in the air and the burly man who had opened the door appeared as if by magic. "See to it, Lewis." Cancerman said. Lewis nodded. He approached Mulder and reached out a hand to unbutton the agent's shirt. Mulder stiffened and swallowed, allowing himself to be stripped of his shirt, his arms held roughly behind his back as he was pushed across the room. No choice, he told himself, never any choice.

Lewis fastened a leather cuff around each of his wrists and fastened them to a bar hanging from the ceiling, then he tugged on a pulley and Mulder found himself being drawn into the air, so that his feet barely touched the ground. The wrenching sensation in his arms calmed him. No choice. Lewis opened a cabinet to reveal an array of whips. One of them was still soaking in water. This was the one he pulled out. Mulder closed his eyes and repeated the words over and over again, like a litany. "No choice, you deserve this, no choice..." Out of the corner of his eye he could see Cancerman's cigarette, still burning in the darkened room and watched as Cancerman leaned forward in eager anticipation. The first blow numbed his senses. He couldn't ever have imagined that such pain existed. More please, more, he thought to himself. Harder, faster, to take him away from himself. The whip hissed as it flew through the air, connecting with his back in a haze of agony that flared, subsided, flared again as each blow struck home.

"Harder, harder, hurt me," he whispered. Hurt me so much that I can't think, can't breathe, can't exist... He had an image of Skinner leaning over him, pushing the sweaty hair out of his eyes. Save me, he said to himself. Hurt me. Save me. Be kind, sir, but hurt me too. Love me,

hurt me, save me... He wasn't sure what was going on in his head now and that was the way he wanted it to be. A relief from the hideous clarity that had dogged him all his life. Now there was only pain and the sound of a man screaming from a long way away.

He thought of Skinner giving him a way out, a person to hate, and it had been such a relief. Someone to hate more than he hated himself, someone else to blame for the pain. Cancerman. It was his fault, not Mulder's any more, not Fox's. Fox was being punished as he deserved and if he was punished enough then maybe the pain inside would end, driven out by the pain in his arms, his back, his shoulders.

It wasn't about failure, about reproach, about his mother's tears every night as she mourned her lost daughter or his father's dysfunctional, unstated, ever-present anger. It was about redemption. Save me. Hurt me. Love me. Save me...

A splash of cold water and he came to.

"Now, now." Cancerman scolded. "You mustn't lose consciousness on me, dear boy. That's no fun at all. And you should make the most of this. Who knows when I'll be back in town again and available to give you what you want?"

"No more..." He murmured, his back on fire.

"I haven't finished yet. I want you to have something to remember me by - some lasting scars." Cancerman smiled. "Lewis is very handy with the whip, almost as handy as your Mr Skinner was with that little present I gave him. A man of such unexpected talents your boss, don't you think?" He grinned.

"Leave Skinner out of this!" Mulder shouted.

"How can I? When it's his name you keep moaning." Cancerman smiled. "You prefer to think Lewis is your boss then go ahead, Fox. It doesn't bother me." He nodded and Lewis raised the whip again. Mulder whimpered, unsure he could stand any more. He had passed out? Damn but it hurt. It hurt enough, he didn't need any more but he didn't have any choice. Cancerman decided, Cancerman was the one. Out of his control. Begging wouldn't do any good. Hate, hate...he sent his hatred out towards Cancerman and the cigarette smoking bastard laughed. "That's what I like about you, dear, dear boy!" He exclaimed. "The truculence, the insolence, the struggle. If only you'd give yourself up to it but you can't can you? Not really. Always the fight. One day we might be able to still that fight, silence your warring soul, Fox. Then who do you think you'll belong to?"

"Not you." Mulder spat. "Not ever you!"

"We'll see." Cancerman nodded and Lewis brought the whip down across his shoulders with a searing force that sent his body shaking into the air, twirling around in his chains. "Everybody has to belong to someone, Fox. You've just never found anyone to take you on. Nobody wants you do they? You're not worthy." His tone was mocking and he seemed to know all the right buttons to press. Mulder let out a sob. "Have you ever thought..."

Cancerman got up and drew close to him, blowing out some smoke into his face, making him cough, "...that I might be all that you deserve, Mulder?" Cancerman laughed. "Oh yes. Think about it. At the end of the day, I might be the only person who'll have you. Me. The person you hate most in the world."

"No." Mulder gritted his teeth. "I don't believe that. Someone else...somewhere else..." but who? he wondered. Who had ever loved him? His parents, yes, he supposed so, in a remote, reproachful way, but who else? Nobody. Nobody claimed him, nobody gave him absolution. Scully loved him as a friend but she couldn't give him this, she couldn't take away the pain and give it back as comfort as Cancerman could, as Skinner had...Skinner...no! His mind twisted away from that.

He recalled his father's love, the love of a man up to his neck in slime, involved in a project that Mulder was sure was obscene. Bill Mulder had never so much as praised him in his life, always angry about something. That still tone, the drinking...never violent, but abusive none the less. Emotional abuse. Distant, cold, disapproving. I want to be loved...he thought despairingly as the whip claimed him again. Love me. Save me. Hurt me. Then make it all better. He thought of Skinner helping him dress, angrily breaking the switch in two. Love me, hurt me, save me...his arms shot fire through his body as the whip sent him flying through the air again. Lewis waited until his body stilled then flicked the whip again. He knew he was screaming, he knew he was calling but he didn't know what he was saying or who he was calling for.

"Let him down." He only heard the voice dimly, jerked his head up and saw Skinner standing in the doorway, his gun aimed at Cancerman's head.

"Why, Mr Skinner. How unexpected." Cancerman smiled. "By all means, Lewis, let him down. I think he's had enough."

Blessed relief from the pain in his arms, firm ground under his feet, under his chest, under his legs, lying face down, panting, feeling the blood and sweat slickly wet on his back.

"Remember." Cancerman hovered over him, smiling. "You belong to me, Fox. Nobody else will have you."

"I know." Mulder opened his eyes, bleakly aware that Cancerman spoke the truth. This was what he deserved, this was all he deserved. It was a relief to know.

"I'll be leaving now." Cancerman smiled. "Another day, another house, another set of chains. I'll let you know when. I'll be expecting you." He didn't touch the young man. Instead he just blew one final lungful of smoke over him, covering his battered body like a shroud and, beckoning to Lewis, he left the room. Skinner raised the gun as he passed, looking murderous, as if he could kill but resisting, marshalling all of his self control to resist. Then he was at Mulder's side.

"Shit. Shit. Why did you come here alone?" He berated, sitting Mulder up. "If you wanted to confront him why didn't you call me? We could have done it together. I've got my own set

of grudges you know. How could you have let him have the opportunity to do this? You know what sort of a sick interest he has in you. Oh damn you, Mulder, why?" He leaned his head forward against Mulder's for a second then drew back, pushing Mulder's sweaty hair out of his eyes as he had done before. Mulder started to shake. "Wait here." Skinner tore at one of the drapes, pulling it down and wrapped it around Mulder's body. Then he pulled Mulder up, placed the injured man's arm around his big shoulders and dragged the other man out of the house and bundled him into his car. "We're going to a hospital," he said grimly.

"No! No hospital." Mulder protested.

"Yes. You haven't seen what they've done to your back." Skinner hissed.

"I don't care. You take me to a hospital and I'll run." Mulder opened the door and half fell out.

"Shit. Stop that. Stop it." Skinner pulled him back in. "Alright. Look, I'll take you home, get you cleaned up. See how bad it is when I take a close look at it."

"If you want. You shouldn't bother. I'm not worth it." Mulder shrugged.

"Shut up." Skinner started the car and set off. "Christ, Mulder I'm having trouble understanding all this," he murmured, glancing at the young agent who was drifting in and out of consciousness. He bit his tongue. Shouting at Mulder right now was not a good idea. Instead he slammed his foot down on the accelerator and sped off into the night.

Mulder woke up to find himself pressed naked into his shower, the cold water bringing him to his senses, a big hand holding him up.

"What...?" he asked blearily.

"Wake up." A hand slapped his face lightly. His back felt numb.

"I can't feel...can't feel my back..." he moaned.

"By the look of it, that's probably for the best." Skinner told him. "Now come on." He pulled Mulder out and looked around for a clean towel. All the ones he could see seemed to be covered in several layers of grime.

"Damn, Mulder, but where do you keep the clean towels?" He demanded. Mulder stared up at him with puzzled eyes.

"You're supposed to wash towels?" he asked. Skinner sighed.

"Your trouble is that you're not house-trained." He let go of Mulder for a second to return to the other room and Mulder immediately slumped to the floor. Skinner sighed and pulled him back up again, walking him out into the lounge, depositing him wet and shivering onto

the couch and disappearing into the bedroom. He returned a few seconds later with what looked like a passably clean sheet and wrapped that around Mulder. Then he pulled Mulder out and laid him face down on the couch, gently peeling the sheet away from his back to survey the damage and wincing again for the hundredth time. "I have to call a doctor," he said. Mulder shook his head feebly.

"It'll be alright. Leave me. A few days, it'll be fine."

"No. It won't." Skinner crouched beside him. "Look, I know someone, someone who owes me a favor. Let me call him. He won't say anything to anybody about this."

Mulder didn't reply, his mind disappearing into the warm, pleasant darkness where there was only a numb pain and no need to think. This was good. He couldn't remember when he had last felt this good. Skinner sighed and got up, making the phone call anyway.

The doctor took one look at Mulder's back and shook his head.

"Jesus. What's been done to him?" He looked up at Skinner who shrugged.

"I don't know, I just found him this way. Although to be honest, by the look of it, it's quite obvious what's been done."

"Why didn't you take him to a hospital?" The man asked.

"Because he won't let me." Skinner shook his head.

"Why?"

"I don't know." Skinner frowned. "But he won't so I called you instead. I require your absolute discretion."

"Of course...discretion." The doctor looked up keenly. "You think this was some sort of sado-masochistic sex game gone wrong?" Skinner looked coldly furious, shaking his head again.

"No." He said firmly. "I think this was something else completely."

The doctor did his best, leaving painkillers and some special ointment, putting a dressing on Mulder's back and bandaging it. Then he left.

Mulder refused to take the painkillers.

"Come on. It must be killing you." Skinner paced around the apartment, sure he was a participant in some sort of bizarre nightmare, trying to fight back memories he thought he had buried years ago.

"No. Leave me alone. Go." Mulder buried his head in a pillow. He wanted to cry and he needed to be alone for that. Skinner didn't understand anything.

"Take them." Skinner just about managed to stop himself from holding Mulder's mouth open, pushing the painkillers into his throat then holding the other man's jaw closed until he swallowed like you did with a cat or dog.

"No." Mulder was resolute and Skinner gave up. He sat down on the floor by the couch, staring numbly at his own feet. "There's no need for you to stay." Mulder told him.

"I need you to tell me what went on." Skinner said.

"I would have thought that was obvious." Mulder replied wearily. "How did you find me? Why did you find me?"

"I came by with some information and found the note in your bin." Skinner said.

"You came by and let yourself in and then rummaged through my garbage?" Mulder asked incredulously.

"I've been worried about you. Ever since...ever since it happened a few weeks ago. I thought your obsession with finding Cancerman was clouding your better judgement. Mulder what on earth possessed you to go there alone? Was it that you didn't want to share your revenge? And how did he manage to get you...why didn't you just draw your gun on him?"

"I didn't take my gun." Mulder said, holding the pillow close against his chest, shutting his eyes.

"What?" Skinner swung round and stared at him and Mulder opened his eyes again.

"I didn't want the temptation." Mulder said, knowing it was a lie. Why was he bothering to lie?

"Then why?" Skinner asked, still staring. Mulder shook his head.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said. Realisation flooded into Skinner's eyes. He got up and walked away from Mulder, disgusted, putting his fist into his mouth and very nearly gnawing it in anger and disbelief. This couldn't be happening. Not again.

"You know..." he said gently, "Cancerman operates by some fairly simple rules. One of his rules is that he wants consent. Did you give him that, Mulder? Is that why you went there?"

Mulder didn't reply. He moved his hand aimlessly over the carpet, finding tufts and pulling on them.

"Answer me!" Skinner was insistent. Mulder looked up. He didn't need to answer, his reply was in his eyes. Skinner left the apartment abruptly.

He wasn't gone long. When he returned he had brought food and drink to replenish

Mulder's empty fridge.

"Thought you'd left. Thought I disgusted you." Mulder murmured.

"I went to get some food." Skinner carefully didn't reply to Mulder's comment. He wasn't sure how he felt about all this. Disgust yes, but not with Mulder, maybe not even with Cancerman. He knew how easy all this was, how simple a pattern it was to fall into when someone like Cancerman was there to prey on your weaknesses. He fed Mulder some pizza and then made him drink some coke. "We need to talk," he said firmly.

"There's nothing to say." Mulder told him.

"Is it...it's not about sex is it?" Skinner asked, sounding faintly hopeful, as if he could deal with it better if it were. Mulder laughed.

"Oh no. I could go to all sorts of places for that!" he said.

"Why Cancerman then, Mulder? Why him?"

"Because he knows what I want and how to give it to me." Mulder replied. "I didn't know how much I wanted it until...that day, in your office."

"If I'd known I never would have gone along with the two of you." Skinner fumed. "Letting him give you that choice, letting you make it. Participating...damn!" What had he been thinking of? Why had he never considered that Mulder's own damaged psyche was at least as vulnerable as his own had once been? Had he really thought this could just be a one-off? Easily contained? No need to go any further? Hadn't he learned anything from his own experience?

"He knows me." Mulder said, his voice hoarse and horrified. "He knows me, sir. He understands things I never realised before. He can give me what I want."

"And you want this so much? This pain?" Skinner queried.

"Oblivion." Mulder told him. "I had no idea how much I wanted it until he, you, gave me it the first time. I had to go back for more. He knew I would. He knows me. He owns me."

"No he doesn't!" Skinner was furious. "Nobody owns you, Mulder."

"He does." Mulder said. "He's all I'm worth. That's what he says."

"No!" Skinner was halfway to wishing he could punch some sense into Mulder before he pulled himself up over the irony of it.

"You then. You could own me. You could give me what he has..." Mulder began hopefully.

"NO!" Skinner was even more angry now, fighting battles and demons of his own, demons

Mulder could not even guess at.

"Then I'll go back to him." Mulder said. "It's not a choice, it's just what will happen. I will go back."

"When I got there..." Skinner began. "You were hoping to be rescued."

"Yes." Mulder nodded wearily.

"You were calling for me. I could hear you as I drove up. It was as if you knew I was on my way."

"No." Mulder sighed. "I didn't know."

"But you did want to be rescued?"

"No. I wanted to be saved." Mulder mumbled. Skinner frowned, understanding the difference only too well.

Skinner couldn't find a way to impart any sort of reason into Mulder's head during the next few days. He tormented himself, knowing, understanding what Mulder sought from Cancerman, knowing he could stop Mulder from making a contract with the devil and yet not speaking out. Not saying what he could because it meant stepping back into a darkness he had long ago forsworn. He considered taking Mulder up on his plea, taking charge of him, but resisted. That way led to another madness and he didn't want any part of it. So if he would not speak up or claim Mulder himself, he was useless. He could do nothing. He stayed there looking after the other man until his wounds had healed. As Mulder became more lucid he started talking less and finally appeared to return to his old self, even assuring Skinner that it had all been a mistake, he had been delirious and hadn't meant any of it. Skinner wanted to believe, but he knew he was being deceived. He knew that deceit only too well.

Mulder returned to work. Apart from some lasting scars on his back he was fine. Skinner longed to send him along for a psychological evaluation but he couldn't without putting both their careers on the line so he let it slide, crossing his fingers, keeping a wary eye on the younger man, hoping against hope that he could keep him out of Cancerman's clutches.

Three months passed and Mulder grew restless. Where was Cancerman? When would he return to give him what he craved? He need was so strong that he even considered asking Skinner again, but he had spent a long time trying to convince Skinner to let the matter drop and he didn't want to re-open that can of worms. He returned home one day to find a packet of cigarettes in his apartment and a note.

"Time you were reminded who owns you. Tonight. 11 p.m. This time make sure Mr Skinner doesn't follow you." Another address. Mulder took the note and found a box of matches in the kitchen. He was about to burn the note and then stopped. Saved. There was no chance of Skinner turning up here again. Why would he? All the same, he put the matches away and

scrunched the paper up, throwing it into the bin as he had before.

Mulder could feel his body tingle in anticipation as he found the address. Another old house in a tree lined road. Did Cancerman have a monopoly on these places? Lewis let him in and he shivered, not meeting the other man's eyes. Cancerman was not alone. He was sitting in an armchair, his hand resting lightly on the head of the young man who was kneeling on the floor beside him.

"Ah, Fox. You've met Alex of course haven't you?" Cancerman smiled. Mulder stiffened, looking down into Krycek's dark eyes.

Part Three: Alex by Xanthe

"You!" Mulder took a step forward. Krycek grinned at him. Cancerman ran his hand through Krycek's thick dark hair and smiled.

"I found Alex several years ago. He also is one of mine." Cancerman told Mulder. "Just like you."

"I'm not..." Mulder opened his mouth to protest but Cancerman held up a hand to stop him.

"Yes you are, Fox. Let's stop having this battle. You've been mine for several years, it's only recently that I've decided to let you know, that's all. I thought it was time to bring you into line. Alex has reproached me for letting you run wild on several occasions and he's quite right.

"He..." Mulder couldn't find coherence in his thoughts. He had come here for one thing and was being shown something completely different.

"Yes. He's very special to me." Cancerman blew out a perfect ring of smoke. "Like you, Fox. Both special to me. So I thought it was time to bring you together. It's what Alex wants, isn't it, Alex?" Krycek nodded, glancing at Mulder with a predatory look in his eye. He got up and went over to Mulder, reaching out to touch the other man's face. Mulder snapped and tried to punch him, only to find his arms grabbed from behind by Lewis.

"Naughty." Krycek slapped Mulder's face hard, then placed his lips against Mulder's and kissed him, his tongue trying to force its way into Mulder's tightly closed mouth.

"Alex!" Cancerman's voice was harsh. "I didn't tell you that you could touch him yet."

"You said he was mine...you said..."

"I said no such thing." Cancerman told him. "Fox is mine, just as you are mine. I might let you use him for a while but you are both mine. Now I'll have to punish you." He smiled and patted the chair next to him. "Come on, Fox. Come and watch. Come and see what fun it is." Lewis propelled Mulder forwards and sat him down in the chair next to Cancerman and then, on a look from his boss, he took hold of Alex and began to undress him to the waist.

Alex shot Mulder a murderous glance.

"This is your fault," he hissed.

"Now, now, Alex." Cancerman stubbed out a cigarette and smiled benignly. "Accept your punishment like a good boy. You know I hate tantrums and scenes." He flicked his fingers and Lewis forced Krycek onto the ground, so that he was kneeling, then brought out a hassock. Krycek leaned over it as if this were a familiar ritual, swallowing convulsively. Mulder tensed, unsure whether this was real or not. It seemed more like a vision, a drug-induced dream. Lewis went and retrieved a long bamboo cane from the cupboard and stood over the prone man. Cancerman flicked a finger lazily.

"Proceed." He instructed.

Mulder bit down on his lip as the cane made contact with Krycek's naked shoulders. Krycek didn't scream. Instead he breathed in deeply and sighed, flexing his smooth shoulders with their nicely toned muscles.

"He's good isn't he?" Cancerman grinned at Mulder, reaching for his cigarettes. Mulder made no reply, watching as Lewis brought the cane down on Krycek's back a second time, leaving a distinct red welt. Krycek gasped. Mulder could feel his own muscles clenching and unclenching as he watched. He hated this. Even knowing it was Krycek who, next to Cancerman, he hated more than anybody else alive, even so, he hated watching him being systematically punished in this way. Now he knew how Skinner must have felt when forced to participate a few months ago. The beating seemed to go on forever but Krycek didn't scream. His back was now criss-crossed with bloody welts and he grunted hard with every biting stroke, but not a sob escaped his lips. Finally, his hair sweaty, he tossed back his head and stared at Mulder, his dark eyes triumphant as he took stroke after stroke of the cane, his hatred and desire for Mulder showing keenly. Those eyes made Mulder shudder. They made a silent communion with Mulder, telling him that he would suffer for what was being done to Krycek, that he would soon be feeling this agony as well, that Krycek would own and possess Mulder just as he was owned and possessed by Cancerman. Mulder wanted to scream, to run, to hide, anything to get away from this hell but he found he could not move. He wondered if Cancerman would stop him leaving. What was it Skinner had said about consent? Somehow he knew it was too late for that. He had given consent months ago. He had sold himself the minute he had accepted that first, sick proposition. Everything else had led inevitably and inexorably from that moment to this, to here and now. Save me...he thought, remembering the note in his bin, wishing he had posted it under Skinner's door or phoned his boss, left a message for him, anything. Anything to give him hope of rescue but there was none.

"See him." Cancerman murmured. "That's what you deserve too, Fox. That's what I'll give to you. No bonds this time, just you and the cane. Nobody holding you down, just you accepting what you must, what is right, what is your due. And afterwards...well Alex has deserved a reward don't you think, Fox? I like to give rewards as well as punishments."

"You bastard." Mulder got to his feet, ran to the door, blindly scrabbled at the door handle.

"It's open." Cancerman waved his hand. "Go if you want. But if you do, I won't punish you. And you want to be punished don't you, Fox? There's still a lot of sins you have to atone for aren't there? Just think of Alex's "attentions" as being part of that punishment."

"A little pain? Soon over?" Mulder queried, quoting Cancerman's words back to him.

"Why that's right, Fox. I'm glad you take my words so to heart. Now come back here and sit down." It wasn't said sternly, or as an order, but it was a command none the less. Mulder swallowed hard, his hand still on the door, then let his hand drop, hating himself as he returned obediently to the chair, watching as Krycek's punishment was continued.

Finally it was over. Krycek lay, breathing deeply, his eyes still triumphant.

"Good boy. Come here." Cancerman beckoned and Alex got up, slowly, stiffly, flexing his shoulders again, still grinning at Mulder. He went and sat next to Cancerman, by his feet. Cancerman ran his hands through Krycek's hair, bent down and kissed the other man lightly on the head. "Very good, Alex. Very good. I'm impressed. That was a hard beating."

Krycek closed his eyes and leaned into Cancerman's embracing fingers. "You see it helps to start the training early." Cancerman told Fox. "I didn't get Alex quite as young as I got you, but I got him fairly young all the same."

"What do you mean?" Mulder asked, confused. "You only "got me" a few months ago."

"Don't be stupid." Cancerman laughed out loud. "I've been preparing you for years. Since you were a boy. Although I was subtle then. I don't suppose you even remember my visits to your family home when you were a child do you?" Mulder stared at him in horror. "Oh I didn't harm you but I shaped you. In little ways, until I could claim you properly as an adult. Until I could set you to work. You've been working for me for some years now, Mulder and I'm very pleased with you."

"I don't work for you!" Mulder protested. He worked for the FBI, for Skinner and ultimately for himself.

"It doesn't matter what you believe." Cancerman shrugged. "But the truth is that you've been mine for most of your life. It's only now that I've chosen to make you aware of it. To be honest..." he smiled quietly. "I've rather liked having you unbroken, blundering around, getting into mischief. It amused me...I itched to correct you of course, but all the same, it did amuse me. However, it couldn't be allowed to continue indefinitely. I take my responsibilities very seriously. Almost as seriously as my pleasures..." Without warning Cancerman ran his hand down Krycek's back with some force and Krycek screamed. "Good." Cancerman took hold of Krycek's hair and pulled the other man's head back. "Denying me your screams. You know how I hate that, Alex. You should have known I'd make you pay for it."

"I'm sorry." Alex whimpered and the look of triumphant hatred faded from his eyes. He

looked genuinely scared. "Please, I'm sorry."

"Yes. I believe you are." Cancerman put a gentle finger on Krycek's lips to stop his whimpering and then turned back to Mulder. "Your turn now." He smiled.

Mulder got up, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

"Stand still." Cancerman said. Then he tapped Krycek on the shoulder and the other man smiled delightedly and got up, reaching out to unbutton Mulder's shirt, taking his time, his vicious eyes imparting their glee in anticipation of Mulder's fate.

"Not him." Mulder turned to Cancerman. "Don't let him..."

"He's earned it." Cancerman said. "And besides, I want to see it." He lit another cigarette.

"No." Mulder pulled back.

"Go then." Cancerman shrugged. "But he'll do just as well as anyone else for what you want. Why don't you do what you did last time, and pretend it's your boss? Nice, honorable Mr Skinner. Did you never wonder, Fox, where Skinner learned his skills with the switch? Did you never wonder why he lets me into his office?"

"Stop it. It's not true!" Mulder put his hands over his ears. "I don't believe it. I won't believe it!"

"Never mind." Cancerman flicked his finger and Krycek continued unbuttoning Mulder's shirt, his insistent fingers moving slowly, sensuously, like a lover, knowing that it unnerved Mulder, that Mulder hated to be leered at in this way. Finally he stripped Mulder's shirt away from his arms and was about to push Mulder down over the hassock when Cancerman stopped him.

"Bring him here. I want to see if he still bears my marks." Krycek took hold of Mulder's arms and pulled him over to where Cancerman sat, shoving him down on his knees in the position that Alex had so recently occupied. Mulder held still, his stomach rebelling, as Cancerman ran a nicotine stained finger down his back, finding the faint scars that remained from the last beating, fingering each one with a loving relish. "Good, very good. I like to leave a sign of my ownership." Cancerman mused. "This time, Alex, make sure he is marked even more." Mulder stifled a whimper as Alex grinned and pulled him back up, thrusting him down in front of the hassock.

"Well?" Cancerman watched, waiting as Mulder knelt there, upright. Mulder looked up into Cancerman's eyes, took a deep breath, and then made his decision. He leaned forward, adopting the same position that he had seen Krycek assume. Cancerman smiled.

The cane felt different to the whip. It stung more, cut deeper, tore less. Mulder wondered how Krycek could have endured such a beating without crying out. He was soon sobbing out loud as the cane bit deep lines into his flesh. Krycek went slowly, moving around him like

some sort of showman so that he could never tell where or when the cane would land next. The welcome pain flooded him with endorphins, aiding him in his quest to seek solace in the dark embrace of numbness that he had sought all his life and which had always eluded him. Here there was no lost sister, no grieving parents, no mistakes, no reproaches, no anger, no disappointment, no work, nothing of his life. Just him and the dark stone altar where he worshipped. He could feel the stone under his body, cold and hard, freezing into his chest and legs and he was tied here, a sacrifice to a god that wanted to devour and own him, an evil god who had claimed him for his own. The high priest took a knife and cut open strips of his back and he could feel the blood run down. Love me, hurt me, save me...he repeated. He was loved here - the knife loved him, the high priest loved him, the evil god loved him. They would hurt him for his own good and by being hurt he would be saved. It all made perfect sense. Mulder kept his eyes tightly closed as he repeated the liturgy. Love me, hurt me, save me...in the name of the darkness and of the pain and of the...he turned his head, hearing a sound. There was somebody at the altar with them, somebody who didn't belong there, somebody as powerful as the evil god, somebody who wanted him back.

"Go away," he murmured. "I don't want to be rescued."

"No. You want to be saved." A voice replied. A man, dressed in white. Mulder giggled insanely. A white shirt...a tie, in this place? In the house of the evil god? He felt the ropes binding his wrists being cut, watched as the man disposed of the high priest, knocking him down, felt himself lifted up into strong arms, taken to the door...then the evil god appeared, smoke billowing around his head.

"You can't take him. He belongs to me." The god said.

"No. He has always been mine." The man replied.

"He has chosen me." The god insisted.

"It wasn't his choice to make. He is mine. I'm taking him back."

"Fox...who do you want to go with?" The god asked.

"You ask the slave who he belongs to?" The man's tone was incredulous. "He doesn't need to answer. His heart is mine, his soul is mine, his body is mine. You tried to seduce him from me, but you can't change what's inside him."

"Fox?" the evil god asked. "Who do you belong to?"

"To you!" he cried.

"Who?" the evil god and the man, his savior, asked in unison.

"You." He whispered.

"Who?" He could see them fading out of sight, reached out and clung onto those strong

arms. "You," he said. "Skinner. You."

A slap brought him back into consciousness.

"I'll ask you again." Cancerman's voice in his ear. "Who do you belong to?"

"Skinner..." he repeated, not sure where he was, who he was, what he was any more.

"I'll ask you again." Another slap across his face. "Who do you belong to?"

"Skinner..." He didn't know any other answer. Why did they keep asking him the same question?

"Alright, Alex." Cancerman looked angry. Why? How had he upset him? Why did his back hurt so much? "Why don't you have your fun with him? I think he needs to be broken down a bit further, don't you? He seems to be having trouble understanding some basic truths."

Alex was galvanised into gleeful action. He knelt behind Mulder, pulled him back against him until Mulder's bloody back was pressed tight against his chest, then undid Mulder's trousers, pushing them down. His boxers followed suit, his shoes, even his socks until he was completely naked. He wanted to protest, to say he didn't want this, but he knew he had no rights here, no power and besides, he deserved it. Alex held him tight, close, his dark eyes full of sex and want, like an unleashed tiger seeking prey. "I've got you now, Fox," he whispered, his fingers running across Mulder's chest, lightly, tweaking a nipple. "I'll show you what you are, who you belong to and why," he hissed. Mulder felt the other man's fingers on his buttocks, prising him apart, pushing him forwards. He was back over the hassock again, clutching on for dear life, shivering as Krycek pressed his tongue against his bloody back, licking at his wounds, setting his teeth on edge. Then the hardness of the other man against his thigh.

"Don't do this...please..." he whimpered but Cancerman was busy lighting another cigarette as if he were just watching television, his pupils dilated, aroused by the scene in front of him. Aroused by the sight of these two beautiful young men, their backs bearing the wounds of their recent punishment, one of them naked, the other half naked. Cancerman sighed. It was a lovely sight.

Now Krycek was smearing Mulder's own blood between his buttocks and Mulder began to weep, softly, holding onto the hassock. Love me...hurt me...save me...he repeated, trying not to think about the hardness that was penetrating him, the pain, trying not to hear Krycek's panting moans as he forced himself inside him. His own tightness was an obstacle. Krycek withdrew, entered again, pushing hard and Mulder screamed with pain. He was an animal, a fox caught in a trap. He was beaten, raped, humiliated, abused. He had never felt such pain, he was being torn apart by it. He felt Alex's hot breath on his shoulder and his high pitched yell of excitement as he came, before slumping down over Mulder's prone body.

"Now." Cancerman pulled on his hair, tugging his head up until he was looking into his eyes.

"Who do you belong to?"

Mulder hesitated.

"Who?" Cancerman asked.

"Skinner." Mulder said, before passing out.

Skinner woke with a pounding heart. It was late, gone 3 a.m. What had woken him? He had dreamed strange, insubstantial dreams, full of ghosts and fleeting, disturbing images. Perhaps it was the dreams that had awoken him. He got up, pulled on his sweat pants, went downstairs, sure he had heard something. There it was again, a faint moan. He found his gun, went to the door, opened it cautiously. There was nobody there. Then he looked down and gave a gasp of sheer horror.

"Mulder?" The young agent was naked, badly beaten, and there was a note hanging round his neck. Skinner frowned and bent down. The note read "Property of Mr Skinner." A look of intense anger and irritation passed over Skinner's face. He pulled the note off Mulder, and dragged the man into his apartment, lying him down on the couch and covering him with a blanket. There was writing on the back of the paper. Skinner turned it over gingerly in his hands as if the note were poisoned and read it.

"Despite my best efforts, he refuses to submit fully to my ownership. He seems to believe that he belongs to you. I have no wish to keep another man's property, Mr Skinner. I therefore return him to you. If I were you I would treat him harshly. That will, no doubt, bring out the best in him. It is also what he wants." There was no question about who the note was from. Skinner crumpled it savagely in his fist and returned his attention to Mulder.

"Damn you, Mulder," he whispered. "Damn you for this a hundred times." He ran a bath, took Mulder in his arms and dumped him in it, his fingers gently exploring his wounds. They were pretty much the same as last time - less tearing but deeper, like cuts rather than jagged stripes. Mulder shivered under his touch.

"Krycek..." he murmured. "Krycek was there. He did this."

"What does it matter who did it?" Skinner asked. "Because at the end of the day you're the one behind it, aren't you, Mulder? They just provide what you want." He ran a sponge over Mulder's back, poured cool water over Mulder's sweaty hair and face, shampooed his scalp with soothing fingers, washing away the bloodstains. Then he lifted Mulder out again, wrapped him up in a towel, gently patted him dry then carried him upstairs to his own bedroom, laid him down in his bed and got in beside him. He took Mulder in his arms, held him tight against his chest. "Rest," he whispered. "I'll take care of you."

"I want to belong..." Mulder whimpered. "I want to belong to you."

"I gathered that much." Skinner murmured wryly.

"Say I'm worthy...He said...he said he was all I was worth...that I wasn't worth any more."

"Ssh." Skinner held him tighter. "You are worthy. Ssh."

"I need to know." Mulder clung onto the hands that were clasped around his waist. "I need to believe."

"You do know. You can believe." Skinner soothed him.

"Then tell me." Mulder cried, like a child. "Tell me..."

"You belong to me. There. You belong to me." Skinner said it over and over again and Mulder sighed, his body relaxing as he fell asleep.

Part Four: Saved by Xanthe

Mulder awoke in pain, closed his eyes and allowed the pain to claim him and smiled. He was warm, he could feel someone's hands clasped around him. He opened his eyes again. Skinner. It wasn't a dream. He had been saved. He belonged somewhere, for the first time that he could remember. This was a kind of heaven, to be hurting, to be safe, to be loved. He closed his eyes again and slept.

Skinner got up and went wearily downstairs. He hadn't slept much. He didn't know what to do about this. Mulder seemed to think it was simple, that all it took was for Skinner to claim him and he'd be safe, but Skinner was sure that he couldn't begin to give the other man what he needed. How could he have been so stupid as to allow Mulder that choice 4 months ago? Why had he been fooled into going along with yet another of Cancerman's plans when he, more than anybody, knew just how dangerous they were? It had seemed simple enough at the time. Cancerman took what he wanted or Mulder ended up out of the bureau. Now it seemed less clear cut. Maybe he should have been more shocked by Cancerman's suggestion. Somebody else would have been but not him. He hadn't liked it, but he thought Mulder deserved to hear it, to make his own decision. Couldn't Skinner have foretold something like this might happen? Why was he still so susceptible to Cancerman's suggestions after all this time? Was he maybe, still "owned" as Mulder wanted to be owned, did he still dance to Cancerman's tune? He took a beer from the fridge and rolled the cool can across his forehead. Damn you for making me go through this again, Mulder, he cursed for the hundredth time. He leaned back, resisting the images that fought in his head, then turned and went back upstairs.

Mulder looked like an innocent child while he slept but he wasn't, Skinner thought grimly to himself. He's a grown man, older than I was when I made this choice. He sat down on the bed beside Mulder, one finger gently touching the other man's hair. His tender feelings surprised him. What exactly was Mulder expecting from him? Just pain, just someone to hurt him? He wasn't capable of that any more. He supposed he might be able to bring himself to deliver such pain for pleasure, but not for its own sake, not just for retribution or punishment. Not under these circumstances. That would merely send Mulder even deeper into the abyss.

Mulder wanted kindness as well, he wanted to be owned, he had said as much. Did he envisage a sexual relationship? Skinner considered that. He found he liked the idea, wondered if somehow he could make sex take the place of pain, maybe create some fantasy S&M scenario that would keep Mulder's worst instincts in check. With a sigh he dismissed the idea. Mulder didn't want pleasure from his pain. He just wanted oblivion. Skinner wouldn't beat a man into oblivion, even if that was what he wanted. It was against all his instincts. An S&M relationship required a meeting of equals with carefully negotiated needs, however unequal the relationship seemed to outward appearances. Mulder wasn't an equal. He was damaged. In need of help. What else? What else could he possibly do? Convince Mulder that he was loved, safe? Hope to alleviate the guilt that way? Surely that was too complex. Mulder was too subtle an individual. And one thing Skinner was sure of - if he didn't get it right, Mulder would go back to Cancerman, go back for good maybe. Leave everything behind, the bureau, Scully, him. Even the X Files. Become totally Cancerman's creature in order to get what he craved.

Mulder opened his eyes and held his breath. Skinner was looking at him, an incomprehensible expression in his eyes.

"Kind of early to be drinking isn't it?" He nodded to the beer Skinner was holding.

"You could drive a man to drink." Skinner told him. Mulder stared up at him, wishing Skinner would rustle his hand through his hair as Cancerman had done to Krycek. Wishing he had tangible proof of what Skinner had told him last night, that he was owned, that he belonged to someone.

"What will happen to me?" he asked in a small voice.

"I don't know yet." Skinner got up abruptly.

"You're going to report me. You're going to send me for a psych evaluation, you're going to get me thrown out." Mulder said, realising that last night had been an illusion, Skinner placating an injured man, buying time.

"No." Skinner said firmly. "Don't second guess me, Mulder."

"What then?" Mulder held his breath, wanting to feel hope, not daring to.

"I'm going to make you breakfast," Skinner said, "and I'm going to rub some of that stuff into your back, the stuff the doctor gave you last time."

"It's at my apartment." Mulder told him.

"I went out and bought some more while you were sleeping last night. And some dressings." Skinner looked down on the bloodstained towel and bed linen with a frown of distaste.

"Then you'll take some painkillers," he said.

"No." Didn't Skinner understand anything? He needed the pain. No point enduring it if you couldn't keep it.

"You don't seem to understand. I wasn't giving you a choice." Skinner said. "I was telling you how it is."

"You can't make me..." Mulder began.

"I own you." Skinner told him roughly. Mulder stared at him. "Well, don't I?" Skinner asked. Mulder nodded, his eyes big.

"You'll keep me then?" He asked.

"For now." Skinner wished he hadn't said that. The fear and insecurity in Mulder's eyes were agonising to behold.

Mulder was obedient for the next few days whilst he recovered but Skinner knew it wouldn't last. Mulder was just desperate to hold onto the person he had chosen to cling to whilst this storm raged around him. At some point they had to go back to real life though. They had to return to the Hoover building and he had to assign Mulder to cases and pretend that he didn't know that this man was a grade A, fuck-up head case.

When Mulder's wounds were on their way to healing, Skinner sat him down on the couch and perched next to him.

"Now we talk," he said.

"Yes." Mulder got up and sat down on the floor beside Skinner, needing to recapture the way Krycek had been with Cancerman. Skinner frowned but bit back his terse comments before he spoke them.

"Tell me what happened." Skinner said. "All of it. In detail." Mulder swallowed, tried to refuse, wanted to refuse but did not dare to in case Skinner told him to leave. The way Cancerman had told him to leave. The way his father had once told him to leave. Stay and I'll hurt you. Leave and you can't come back. The same old choice. He choked his way through a description but Skinner stopped him.

"Not like this," he said. "I don't just need to know what happened. I need to know how it made you feel when it was happening."

"How I felt?" Mulder went cold. How could he explain that? It was too sick and besides one of the reasons why he had wanted it to happen was to avoid having to feel anything at all. "I needed to be in that numb place, where nothing exists. Away from being rational, away from instinct, emotion, knowledge." He said, closing his eyes, remembering, yearning to be back there. "I wanted...obliv..."

"Oblivion, yes. You've told me before."

"I had no idea such a place existed." Mulder admitted. "Before..." he flushed. Skinner gritted his teeth.

"Yes," he said tersely. "Before I showed you."

"And him. You and him. Then once I knew, well, I guess I'm an addictive personality." Mulder grinned.

"You don't say?" Skinner put a tender hand on the other man's shoulder and Mulder leaned into the embrace, remembering Krycek. Skinner pulled back sharply and Mulder's eyes registered the rejection. "Let's get one thing straight, Mulder." Skinner told him. "I won't hurt you. I am not going to string you up and beat you into a pulp."

"Why not?" Mulder asked. "You did it once."

"But not again. I wouldn't, I can't. It is addictive if you have certain emotional problems. And you clearly do. I'm sorry. It's my fault...I should have known, I should have known it would have this effect on you."

"Then you don't care." Mulder got up.

"Where are you going?" Skinner demanded.

"You can't give me what I need. I was wrong." Mulder told him bitterly, going to fetch the bag they had collected from his apartment, with his few belongings in it.

"You can't leave." Skinner told him abruptly. "And I won't give you what you want because it won't do you any good. When will enough be enough? When your body gives out? When you're covered in scars?"

"Leave me alone. What do you care?" Mulder yelled furiously, charging towards the door, finding his way blocked by Skinner's wide body. "You don't know, you don't understand, you don't care..." he screamed, tears blinding his eyes as he struggled to get past Skinner and failed. Skinner put his arms around him.

"I do know." His fingers were gentle but firm on Mulder's tense shoulders.

"How?" Mulder raged, "how can you possibly know?"

"Because I've been there too." Skinner's dark eyes looked into Mulder's and the younger man took a sharp intake of breath, confused by the sadness he saw in Skinner's eyes, the trace of a memory too painful to endure.

"What?" He asked. "What do you mean?" Skinner let go of him, returned to the lounge, sat down on the couch.

"Vietnam." He said. "Have you ever wondered what it feels like to be the only person left alive when everyone else in your unit is dead? It's called survivor's guilt I believe. It nearly sent me mad. Some people commit suicide, others turn to drink. At my most vulnerable I was approached by someone who offered me another way of dealing with it."

"Cancerman?" Mulder whispered.

"Yes." Skinner nodded.

Mulder tiptoed over to the couch, sat down beside Skinner, reached out a hand, wanting to comfort, not knowing how.

"He seems to have an instinct for these things, Mulder. I blame myself for letting him get his claws into you, though. That was unforgivable. I know the way he works. I should have realised that he had seen in you what he saw in me. With you I presume it was your sister?"

"Yes."

"Shit. That's a long time to carry around such guilt, Mulder." Mulder nodded, not taking his eyes off Skinner.

"Tell me about what happened to you," he asked, needing to know. Skinner nodded, took a deep breath, leaned back.

"I've never told anyone else. I wouldn't be telling you now but it's important that you understand. Cancerman is quite a few years older than me. I never knew his name back then either. Usually he just got us to call him sir." Skinner grimaced.

"Us?"

"I wasn't the only one he kept," Skinner told him. "Even back then he had these links, shady links with big business, with the military, with the FBI. I could never be sure who it was he worked for. That hasn't changed." He shrugged. "He found me as I was considering suicide, talked me out of it, made me feel secure, offered me a way to relieve my feelings. I was 19." Skinner shuddered. "I didn't know such men existed. He would summon me, at his time and convenience. It started off small. A threatening hand, a warning look when I upset him. I thought he wanted my company, that he liked me. He'd clearly been in the military, maybe still was, and I thought he understood what I was going through but he was just softening me up. He seemed to know so much about the world, he was hard, invulnerable. I guess I even liked him. For a bit. I was a skinny kid and he was a fitness fanatic. Always a smoker though, but a hard-muscled son of a bitch. I'm not sure I could have beaten him in a straight fight then. I could now, but not then. I wasn't very streetwise." Skinner grinned. "One day I annoyed him, I don't know what I'd done. Half the time I never knew what I'd done to annoy him, and he just hit me, across the jaw with the back of his fist. I was stunned. I couldn't believe it, and I blamed myself. I felt I needed his friendship, that I couldn't afford to antagonise him. He made me feel like that. He was as nice as pie for a couple of weeks and I confided everything to him - about all my friends being wiped out in that ambush, about

how I felt for having survived. That was when he told me he could relieve those feelings. He asked if I'd consent, told me he'd punish me and I found myself agreeing. I suppose he had me so much under his spell that I couldn't see how weird it was, and like you, I probably wanted it. I felt I'd deserved it. He made me feel like that. It was what he kept saying." Skinner paused, got up, stretched his tense muscles while Mulder watched.

"Go on." Mulder whispered. "Please tell me. I need to know."

Skinner swung around. "The first time hurt me so much I cried," he said savagely, his expression one of agonised remembrance. "I cried for hours. Me, a big, strong marine. I couldn't believe he'd taken me to a place where it could hurt so much. I suppose I cried for more reasons than physical pain though. I cried for my lost friends, I cried for myself and my fear of death. He let me cry, he didn't make me ashamed of it. It felt almost...like a relief. Like therapy or something. It actually made me feel better, but it was a drug, for him as well as for me. Later on...his methods become more brutal. And then, like now, he didn't enjoy actually doing the deed. He would watch. Sometimes he'd talk to me, tell me that this was what I deserved...you probably know it all, all that crap."

"Oh yes." Mulder closed his eyes and sighed.

"And once he was sure of me...there were other games he'd play. Other men he introduced me to. He'd watch us...well some of the things he had us do are things I'd prefer to forget. It didn't occur to me to disobey him. I was 19, I was used to following orders and he could give me something I wanted. I went along with it." Skinner looked wearily despairing. "Not only that, but he had me hand it out as well. Like Krycek did with you. He showed me where, and how, and how hard, and for how long, and all that. He was a master at it. Still is I suppose. He hasn't changed."

"You got away from him though. You escaped." Mulder said, feeling hope inside.

"Yes. One of his other..." Skinner hesitated "...'boys', rescued me. Or rather we escaped together. We fell in love." He made a face. "And being loved made a lot of difference. I needed the pain less. I felt worthwhile. I got promoted at work, my self-esteem started to climb and he couldn't keep his hold on me. I got away. I thought I'd got away forever until he showed up in my office a few years ago and I was given strict instructions from on high to co-operate with him. He still had some power over me. He could still find a way back into my mind. After all these years." Skinner shook his head. "You're lucky, Fox. You found a way of resisting him, the only way of resisting him, before he got too much of a hold on you."

"What do you mean?" Mulder frowned. "I don't feel like I resisted him at all."

"Of course you did. He needs to own you, but you wouldn't let him. He won't keep you unless he owns you completely, body and soul. As soon as his grip on me weakened, I was out of there. He didn't contact me again. It was the same with you. You wouldn't accept him fully, completely, and he needs that. That's the way he gets to escalate it, to move things on. You were clever or lucky or...I don't know. I don't know how you did it but somehow you convinced him that you were already "owned" by someone else. By me. It worked."

"It was how I felt." Mulder told him. "It was what I wanted in my head. Not him. You."

"And now what?" Skinner asked wearily. "I've already told you that I can't give you what you want. I promised myself I wouldn't go back there, be that person again. All I can give you is what was given to me. A way out. Someone to love. Is that what you want?"

"I don't know." Mulder shook his head. "Until Krycek...that is, I never...with a man..." He closed his eyes, remembering the rape, wishing it would shock him, or sicken him but instead he just accepted it, his just punishment, his due.

"I can give you love." Skinner crouched down beside him. "I'll protect you, keep you safe. I'll go through all this stuff with you, take it apart, give you some of yourself back again, but I won't beat you. If that's all you want, or all that will satisfy you, then you really are lost, Fox, because there won't be any way out if you go back to him."

Mulder sighed. "I don't know what I want," he said. "After what you just said...I know I still want the oblivion, but I don't know if you can give me a substitute for it. I will try though."

"I'll accept that much then." Skinner smiled.

"Will you...that is...I think I want..." Mulder leaned forward, wanting, needing physical proof that he was owned, taken care of, safe. Skinner caught him up, kissed him.

"After what happened... it might be too soon," Skinner murmured.

"Please, I want to." Mulder remembered the awful pain as Krycek thrust into him, closed his eyes, knew he wanted that pain back. Would Skinner guess he was using him for that? Would he know? Christ, when did I become such a sorry, deceitful specimen? he wondered. Skinner didn't know, he didn't guess. With a guilty heart, Mulder pulled the other man close to him, his hands urgently undoing Skinner's shirt, his belt, his trousers.

"Hey, slower...easy..." Skinner stopped his questing hands. "We have time..."

"Want you now..." he muttered, wondering at these new sensations, feeling a man's lips against his, not the more familiar female ones he was used to. Skinner pulled him and caught hold of the back of his head, holding him tight against him, kissing him passionately, his thigh grinding into Mulder's, exciting him, arousing him. He could feel the hardness of the other man's erection, wanted that hardness inside him, hurting him. If Skinner wouldn't hurt him any other way, at least he could hurt him this way, pretending at pleasure.

Skinner broke free from the embrace, pulled Mulder's arm, took him upstairs to the bedroom, laid him on the bed, undressed him, stroked his back gently, teasing at his sore shoulders with his tongue.

"Just fuck me," Mulder begged. "Now. Fuck me."

Skinner turned him over onto his back. "Not yet." He leaned down, kissed Mulder's mouth, his hands pumping Mulder's cock until he felt he would burst.

"Now." Mulder moaned, "Please, now."

"You're very demanding." Skinner sighed, and then grinned. "I suppose the finer arts of seduction are beyond you? It's just straight in there?"

"Don't play with me. Just do it." Mulder insisted. "Now." Skinner rolled him over again with big, deft hands, found lube and condoms in his bedside drawer, thrust careful fingers inside Mulder, massaging gently. Mulder bit his lip. He was still sore, but he wasn't going to let Skinner know that in case he stopped.

"You're tight." Skinner told him, "You're not used to this, Fox. I don't think it's a good idea right now...there's other stuff we can do."

"No." Mulder growled. "Do it." Skinner's fingers were hurting him and he knew his hard cock would hurt even more, the way Krycek had hurt him.

"Fox?" Skinner stopped, rolled the other man over, bent over him and looked deep into his eyes. Mulder tried to evade that searching look but it was no use. "No," Skinner whispered. "You can't fool me, Fox. I've been there remember? I know all the tricks. Listen to me. You don't need this. You don't need anybody hurting you, you don't need punishments or pain. You don't need it or deserve it."

"I do..." Mulder began but Skinner silenced him with a look.

"No." Skinner smoothed back his hair, kissed his forehead gently. "You wanted to be saved remember?" He whispered. "I can save you. If you trust me enough, I can."

"Saved...Save me...love me..." Mulder began, remembering the litany, repeating it, gazing into Skinner's dark eyes. "Hurt me..." he finished. "I can't help it." He reached out to draw Skinner's gaze back to his as the other man averted his eyes and sighed. "That's just how it goes."

"If I can give you two out of those three things, isn't that enough?" Skinner kissed his neck gently, then his mouth, his hair. "I won't let you go without a fight, Fox. Do you hear me?"

"Yes." Mulder lay back against the pillow, his sore shoulders hurting badly. He felt comforted, safe. It was a good feeling. Better than the pain. Being loved, being saved. Maybe between them they could cancel each other out, maybe Skinner was right. He had escaped so maybe Mulder could.

"I'll take good care of you. For as long as you need to sort it out, Fox," Skinner whispered. "Then you can go if you want, but until then, I'll own you like you want me to. I'll keep you safe." He picked Mulder up in his arms and held him cradled against his chest. Mulder clung there, hoping.

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