

## The Agreement by Xanthe

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### The New Boss by Xanthe

Mulder was working late. He glanced at his watch. 10pm. A shadow passed underneath the door and he looked up.

"Mulder."

"Sir." He got up, surprised.

"Sit down." Skinner waved a hand and Mulder did as he was told, watching warily. He wasn't at all sure about this new boss that had suddenly been foisted on him. Since when did lowly special agents report directly to the Assistant Director and since when did Assistant Directors act as supervisors to special agents? A whole chain of command had been bypassed and he wasn't at all comfortable with it. Bad enough that he had to have a boss at all - Blevins had been a nuisance, but he didn't have anywhere near the power that Skinner did. Mulder didn't like it. Skinner didn't come into the room. He lurked by the filing cabinet near the door, leaning against it.

"So this is where you work." Skinner glanced around.

"Yeah." Mulder shrugged.

"Hmm." Skinner stared at him for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. Mulder shifted, feeling unnerved. "Well, Mulder, your first case under my direct supervision and I have to say that I have mixed feelings about it."

"Sir?" Mulder stiffened, wondering what was coming next.

"You solved it. Brilliantly well if we discount the basic tenet of your case which is that the serial killer was a mutant with a taste for human livers."

"Yes, sir." Mulder shrugged. He had long ago stopped expecting to be believed.

"And I have been told that we should accept your preposterous theories."  
"Really?" Mulder raised an eyebrow, wondering who had told Skinner that.

"Yes. However, there are certain aspects of the case that I am unhappy with." Skinner suddenly moved into the room and Mulder felt a wave of panic. The man had an air of menace to him, a kind of leashed power that was threatening. His sheer physical presence was overwhelming. Quite simply he took up too much space - it was intimidating.

"Yes." Skinner continued. "So I thought I'd bring myself down here to talk to you about them."

"Please, sit down." Mulder offered, waving a hand at a chair.

"No thank you." Skinner didn't smile. "I won't be long. You see, Mulder, I make it my business to fully understand the people who report to me. We work in a stressful field, where a wrong action or approach can result in death. I like to make sure that I have the correct approach for each individual under my command."

"Under your command...?" Mulder repeated quizzically. "Sorry, sir. You sounded sort of, well military."

"I was in the marines, Mulder." Skinner told him. "Which is where I learned about taking responsibility for the personnel who report to me. I picked up some unusual techniques but they've always worked for me. Which brings me back to you. On first acquaintance, I must say that I find you a problem."

"A problem, sir?" Mulder chewed on his lip.

"Yes. I admire your record, son, but I'm not sure about your methods. However, if I take on anybody, then I support them, all the way. No question of it."

"Well...thank you, sir." Mulder was surprised.

"But that support has certain obligations of its own." Skinner informed him. Mulder hesitated.

"Obligations?" He queried.

"Yes." Skinner nodded. "So I need to find out just what sort of approach to you I should have. You see, Mulder." Suddenly he was very close. So close that Mulder could smell his aftershave mingled with the raw scent of the other man. "I don't tolerate ANY of my direct orders being disobeyed. You've only been under my supervision for a few days and you've already disobeyed me once. I seem to recall that I forbade you to go near Eugene Tooms."

"Yes, sir." Mulder nodded, his face inches away from his boss.

"And you disobeyed me." Skinner stated flatly. Mulder swallowed and nodded, suddenly feeling rather scared of this grim faced ex-marine macho man who stood too close to him. "So, we need to come to an agreement." Skinner told him tersely. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Mulder thought about it. "Is that a Saturday?"

"Yes, Mulder." Skinner's breath was warm on his face.

"Um...usually I come into work on a Saturday."

"Not tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll pick you up at your apartment at 8 am. Make sure you're dressed for a hike."

"A hike?"

"Yes." Skinner drew back, nodding to himself. "And a run."

And so saying, he left the room. Mulder sat back in his chair, trying not to notice the way his stomach was flipping inside his body.

7:58 am. Mulder jogged up and down outside his apartment, trying to keep warm. It was sunny but there was a cold wind. At exactly 8 am a four-wheeled drive vehicle came roaring round the corner and swung up next to him. Skinner sat behind the wheel, dressed in combat fatigues. Mulder stared at him. He looked completely different.

"Get in." Skinner opened the door for him and Mulder slid into his seat. He really wasn't at all sure about this. He had done some digging on his new boss after last night but had seen nothing that implied the man would drag him off to a remote spot in the country and then murder him. All the same, why did he feel so unsafe? Skinner had an unblemished record at the FBI and one phrase kept coming up over and over again: Firm but fair. A strict disciplinarian but everybody who worked under him respected and admired him. And he was notorious for sticking by his subordinates, even those who had really screwed up big time. Mulder felt some relief at this but somehow he was sure he was just about to find out exactly what the price for that support was.

They drove into the country in silence, up into some hills and then Skinner stopped the jeep. He got two large rucksacks out of the back and handed one to Mulder, instructing him how to strap it on properly.

"Now we run." Skinner said.

"Run? With this on my back?" Mulder complained, feeling like he had been weighed down with a ten-ton truck.

"Yes. I understood you were a jogger." Skinner glanced at him.

"Well yes, but I don't usually carry all this luggage around with me." Mulder said. Skinner stared at him for a moment and something in those dark eyes made Mulder uneasy. He didn't want this man thinking that he was weak so, reluctantly, he set off.

Skinner set the pace, a leisurely trot and Mulder struggled to keep up with him. He noticed the way Skinner's muscles moved smoothly, used to all sorts of physical exertion. Mulder wasn't exactly unfit himself, but even so, Skinner was in peak condition and seemed not to notice the weight of the rucksack on his shoulders. They ran in silence for an hour or so until Mulder grew increasingly uncomfortable. What was this? Some sort of endurance test? How was this helping Skinner understand what approach to take with him? And what did he mean by that anyway?

"Sir," he stopped. "What is this?" He asked. Skinner turned, his eyes inquiring.

"Well I don't know, Mulder. I was rather hoping we'd find out," Skinner replied.

"By running in silence? For how long? And is this rucksack really necessary?" Mulder demanded.

"That depends." Skinner shrugged. "Shall we continue?" He set off again and Mulder sighed and followed on behind.

Four hours later he was exhausted. They had stopped for water breaks once every hour and then continued in silence.

"I'm hungry." Mulder said at last. Skinner turned round.

"You should have said. We'll stop." He didn't smile. In fact Mulder hadn't seen him smile once but all the same, there was an odd sort of companionship here. Skinner unbuckled his rucksack and rummaged around in it. "There are rations in yours," he told Mulder. Mulder screwed up his face. Rations? What sort of mad military experience was this guy re-living? It was a bit scary. He opened his rucksack and put his hands in. There was a blanket in here and a medical kit and the promised rations. Mulder sat down and leaned back against his rucksack with a sigh. It was actually quite beautiful up here in the hills. The sky was blue although the wind was still blowing strongly and the grass seemed green and fresh underneath.

"Beautiful isn't it?" Skinner asked.

"Yes." Mulder nodded.

"I love it here." Skinner gulped down some water.

"You come running up here often?" Mulder asked. Skinner shrugged.

"Sometimes. I don't have all that much free time," he said.

"I guess not," Mulder murmured.

Skinner got out a map and a compass and checked their direction.

"We'll make for the lake," he said, glancing at Mulder and showing him the map. The lake was miles away! They wouldn't have time to get there and back before nightfall, which meant...He remembered the blanket in his rucksack. Oh shit. Mulder opened his mouth to protest then caught the strange, intense way Skinner was looking at him and so he shut it again.

Half an hour later Skinner got to his feet, strapped his pack back on again and set off. Mulder stared after him, sighing and then he did the same. Really this whole experience was becoming more and more surreal.

They stopped for a break a couple of hours later. Mulder's whole body was shaking from the exertion and his feet ached. He took off his shoes with a sigh and then his socks. His feet were badly blistered.

"Hmm." Skinner came over. "You should put something on those." He reached into his pack and took out the medical kit. "You see, these packs do have some uses," he told Mulder. Mulder glowered at him, thinking that he probably wouldn't have blisters if Skinner hadn't insisted on him carrying the pack in the first place. Skinner rubbed some cream into his sore feet and Mulder was too tired to protest. He just lay back, wondering what on earth was going on in Skinner's mind. Skinner stared at him, his eyes questioning. But what was the question, Mulder wondered? And what answer was he expected to give? Skinner finished with his feet and helped Mulder back into his shoes and socks. Then he got up and strapped his pack back on again. Mulder glared at him. Hadn't the man seen the state of his feet? Did he seriously expect him to continue with this mad run? Obviously he did. Mulder got up and pulled his pack on again, sighing. Skinner was still looking at him as if waiting for something but Mulder had no idea what it was the other man was waiting for so he just ran past him, ignoring him. A few seconds later Skinner caught him up.

The lake was beautiful. Almost worth the cramped muscles and sore feet just to get here, Mulder thought to himself. It stretched out blue and glistening and they had it all to themselves.

"Time for a swim I think." Skinner divested himself of his pack, stripped off all his clothes and dived in before Mulder even had time to process this information. All the same, the water did look very inviting. Before he knew it, he found himself undressing and diving in as well. The cold water soothed his aching feet and sweaty body and made him feel gloriously tingly and glad to be alive. When he looked round he noticed that Skinner had got out and was dressed again.

"Dinner." Skinner announced when Mulder struggled out of the water a few minutes later. "You make the fire. I'll catch the fish."

"Catch the fish...with what? Are you serious?" Mulder asked.

"Of course." Skinner nodded. "A few maggots, a bit of string and a stick from a tree. Simple." He got out a knife and cut a stick from a nearby tree, pulled some string from his pack and scraped around in the earth for some suitable insect life to attract the fish. Mulder stared at him in astonishment before setting off to gather some firewood. He didn't have any matches and was unable to get the fire alight before Skinner returned with 4 plump fish, still wriggling.

"Here. I'll do that. You gut the fish." Skinner leaned over the fire and Mulder stared at the fish glumly. What did he know about gutting fish? Within seconds Skinner had a huge fire going and Mulder was still staring at the fish. "Alright, Mulder. I'll do the fish as well." Skinner sighed, getting out his knife again and cutting into the fish with practised hands. Mulder looked away.

It was nearly dark by the time they started eating. Mulder couldn't believe how good those fish tasted. He could have eaten them twice over.

"Looks like I should have caught more." Skinner told him. The man still hadn't broken into a smile. Mulder nodded.

"They were wonderful. This is a beautiful spot, sir."

"Yes it is. We'll camp here for the night," he said. "There's a bedroll in your pack."

"I noticed." Mulder shrugged, looking at his boss across the campfire.

"Yes, Mulder?" Skinner asked.

"Nothing." Mulder delved into his rucksack and pulled out his bedroll, lying it on the ground near the fire.

"You wanted to ask me what all this is about." Skinner said.

"Well...I have been wondering." Mulder admitted.

"Good. Of course after having read your file I was never in any doubt about the levels of your curiosity!" Skinner exclaimed. "However I've been pleased by today, Mulder."

"You have?" Mulder asked incredulously.

"Oh yes. I think I've learned a lot." Skinner nodded.

"Like what? We've hardly spoken." Mulder pointed out.

"True." Skinner nodded again. "However you showed me that you trust me and trust is very important."

"I don't trust anyone." Mulder told him sulkily, feeling rather insulted.

"Then you are very good at making leaps of faith," Skinner said.

"Oh yeah, I'm good at that alright!" Mulder grinned. "How did you come to that conclusion?" He asked.

"This was about you, Mulder. I would have gone along with anything you wanted. If you had asked to turn back or not to make the trip I would have agreed. If you had asked me to fetch the jeep and pick you up when your feet blistered, I would have agreed. If you'd refused to carry the pack, that would have been fine."

"You mean I could have saved myself all this?" Mulder asked ruefully, gingerly undoing his shoes and examining his swollen feet.

"Yes. Instead you followed me on a journey that you didn't want to go on. That says a lot about you.

"That I'm stupid?" Mulder queried.

"Not at all. That you trust me not to get you lost. That your curiosity outweighs your personal sense of danger and discomfort. That your survival skills are somewhat lacking but you more than make up for that in your eagerness to understand the world and other people. That you like fresh fish."

"Well that last bit I agree with." Mulder grinned across the fire wondering if his boss had just made a joke but still Skinner didn't smile. "So how does this tie in with me disobeying that order about Tooms?" Mulder asked.

"That depends on you." Skinner said thoughtfully. "I like you, Mulder. I've examined your record and it's quite brilliant. I'm impressed with your behavior here today. I will take you on, Mulder. I had my reservations - you're quite clearly going to be a lot of work, but I've never shirked hard work. So I've decided to accept you."

"Thanks...but, I mean...I thought you already had taken me on so to speak."

"Not at all." Skinner shook his head. "You've been assigned to me. But it's up to me to decide whether or not to accept you. Now that I have, you'll have to decide whether to accept me or not."

"I have a choice?" Mulder asked.

"There's always a choice, Mulder." Skinner said firmly. "Now you have a problem with authority figures, right?"

"Um..." Mulder was thrown by the question.

"Male authority figures at least." Skinner said. "I've read your file. I've looked into your background. I'm very thorough. I don't want to psychoanalyse you, Mulder, I just need to get a handle on your behavior. You had a bad relationship with your father. Yes?"

"Yes." Mulder gulped, feeling uncomfortable with this strange, strict man knowing so much about him.

"Did he ever hit you?" Skinner asked.

"Why is this...?"

"Just answer the question." Skinner said.

"Well...yes."

"Often?" Skinner wanted to know.

"When I played up." Mulder shrugged.

"Often then." Skinner remarked.

"Yeah." Mulder shrugged again.

"So you're used to this as a form of disciplinary action?" Skinner asked.

"I...what are you suggesting, sir?" Mulder enquired, his mind racing at the unexpected turn of events.

"This, Mulder. You, quite clearly, are going to get into lots of trouble during your time as my subordinate. This is going to cause me headaches. I'm happy to stand by you. Like I said, I admire you. However you are badly disciplined and I blame your father for that. Some men have no idea. This is why you have a bad attitude towards authority. I suspect you are capable of learning, but you've never had a very good role model. Also your own somewhat passionate and unruly nature makes it hard for you to knuckle down under anyone. I aim to make you re-learn the lessons of your childhood, but in a different way. If it works you might stay alive. If it doesn't, well you'll be no worse off than if I hadn't tried."

"What does that mean?" Mulder couldn't take his eyes off his boss.

"Punishment without affection, retribution filled with reproach - I disapprove of these things." Skinner said, stretching his long, muscular arms. "Your father made you resentful. He hurt you without showing you unconditional love and support. Am I right?"

"I..." Mulder could feel the tears springing into his eyes as he recalled the amount of times his father had swung a belt at him then banished him to his room, refused to speak to him for days on end.

"Am I right?" Skinner asked insistently.

"Yes," he whispered.

"So you're always on the defensive with male authority figures." Skinner shrugged. "You can be as defensive as you like with me, Mulder. It won't change anything. I'm more than able to handle you. However your father was right about one thing - you do need discipline."

"I don't like the sound of that." Mulder said.

"Oh I rather think you do." Skinner's eyes were deadly serious as they caught his across the fire. "You won't like the reality, but you do like the idea. Don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about some sort of perverted sex game here, just pure discipline. I don't suppose for a moment that you go out looking for people to hurt you for sexual pleasure. I don't go out looking for people to hurt. In fact I find the very idea abhorrent. All the same, I recognise

when a man needs someone to show some concern about his behavior, to check it before it goes too far. To deliver punishments where they're deserved."

"What sort of punishments are we talking about, sir?" Mulder asked, feeling rather weak and he was sure that wasn't just as a result of all the day's exertion.

"Physical punishment, Mulder." Skinner told him.

"You're proposing to whip me when I disobey you?" Mulder asked incredulously. Skinner laughed out loud, the first time Mulder had seen his features display anything other than stern self-control.

"I like your use of the word "when" and not "if". I was right about you, Mulder. You are going to be hard work. And yes, "whip" is a fair description of what I'll do to you. Not always. A punishment is my decision not yours. But a whipping will usually be the inevitable consequence of disobeying a direct order from me, yes. On other occasions I will use other methods."

"I don't believe I'm hearing this." Mulder stared at his boss, a look of amazement on his face. "Look, sir, I'm a grown man, not a kid."

"Quite. The military was full of grown men who needed discipline." Skinner shrugged. "I endured it in my time and it did me good. Kept me from getting myself and my brothers-in-arms killed. I don't resent the man who punished me. As a matter of fact I'm very fond of him. We still keep in touch and I'm sure that if I ever forget the lessons he taught me, he'll show up on my doorstep to make me re-learn them. Painfully. And I'm 9 years older than you, Mulder."

"And you'd let him?" Mulder asked incredulously.

"You're never too old to learn." Skinner shrugged. "And you have a lot to learn, Mulder. An awful lot."

"You beat all your subordinates?" Mulder asked. Skinner laughed for the second time.

"Oh no. I told you, Mulder, I treat everyone differently. I use appropriate action for each agent under my command. But I knew I'd need a different approach for you - you are quite obviously special. Take Agent Scully for example. I wouldn't drag her out here and subject her to this treatment."

"Good." Mulder hated the idea of Scully enduring all this physical hardship.

"No, I have a different method entirely for dealing with Scully. But then I don't suppose Scully will disobey too many of my direct orders." Skinner pointed out. "You will. I'm not saying I'm happy about that, I'm just warning you what you can expect if you do. I don't want your career ruined, Mulder. You have a bright future. I'm happy not to give you conventional punishments, or indeed put anything down on your file that will be too

incriminating for you."

"But you will whip my butt whenever I upset you?" Mulder still couldn't believe he was having this conversation.

"Only if you agree that this is the way you wish me to run my supervisory role over you." Skinner shrugged. "If you don't, then fine. We'll forget we had this conversation. However I must warn you that conventional FBI reprimands might hinder you more in your search for the truth than a taste of my belt across your backside. Think about it."

"I don't need to." Mulder said.

"Oh?" Skinner raised an enquiring eyebrow. "We have an agreement then?"

"How did you know my decision was to agree?" Mulder was astonished. He was also more than a little amazed by the decision he had reached as well.

"I know you, Mulder. And I know what sort of a man you are. Don't worry. I'll take very good care of you."

And so saying, he got out his bed roll, laid it out, disappeared inside the blanket and fell fast asleep.

Mulder stared at his boss for a while, running over their "agreement" in his head. This was weird, surreal, bizarre...and curiously rather reassuring as well. He could cope with a bit of physical pain, far better than having to appear before disciplinary enquiries every five minutes, having his pay docked, being reassigned, sent off on dull pointless missions, being assigned a "minder" to make sure he obeyed the rules, black marks on his file. All the normal disciplinary procedures he was so familiar with that they made him want to scream. They slowed him down. Skinner was giving him a different way to play the game and a different set of rules to play by. As for the pain, well how bad could it be? Mulder shrugged to himself and settled down in his blanket, following his boss's example and falling fast asleep.

"You're stiff and your feet are so swollen you don't think you can fit them into your shoes." Skinner told him as he groaned himself awake the next day.

"That's about it..." Mulder cried out loud as a spasm of muscular pain shot through him.

"So the best thing to do is get those muscles warmed up and your feet cooled down. A brisk swim should do it. Get your clothes off."

Mulder did as he was told and then Skinner picked him up, carried him over to the water and dropped him bodily into the lake. Mulder screamed as the icy water engulfed him. He started to kick, every muscle in his body protesting and he called his boss every name under the sun. A few seconds later Skinner appeared beside him.

"You bastard! You total bastard!" Mulder shouted.

"Watch your tongue, Mulder." Skinner told him, his face unsmiling. Mulder wondered if those 2 laughs he had witnessed the previous night had been some figment of his imagination or tricks of the firelight. "I won't tolerate being called names. Come on. I'll race you to the other side." And so saying he ducked his bald head under the water and swam off. Mulder watched him for a while and then, sighing, followed him.

Actually the day turned out to be good fun. Skinner showed him how to catch and gut some fish for breakfast, how to get the fire lit without matches, how to track through the hills. He pointed out various different varieties of wildlife that would have passed Mulder by and all in all he was very good company. Mulder felt quite absurdly cheerful. Finally it was time to return home.

"Couldn't I just stay here?" Mulder asked. "You could get the jeep and pick me up."

"Is that what you want?" Skinner looked at him intently. Mulder flushed. Damn, why did he want this man to think well of him? This strict, stern man who had last night promised to beat the shit out of him if he ever screwed up. Yet also, also the man who had promised to support him come what may, to always be on his side. The man who had showed him the way round the insides of a fish!

"No," he murmured. "I'll walk it." He shouldered himself into his pack and started the long trudge back to the jeep. At least Skinner didn't insist that they run this time and they took a shorter route back so it only took them a couple of hours. Mulder marvelled at the other man's level of fitness, feeling strangely at peace after the exertions of the past few days. Skinner wasn't exactly a man for small talk, but all the same they did find some topics of conversation. His boss shared some of the details of his experiences in Vietnam and asked Mulder a series of searching questions about his childhood, his sister and some of his FBI cases. He didn't give Mulder any fake sympathy, but he did show him the courtesy of listening intently to what Mulder had to say and grasping the essence of the information he was given immediately. Mulder decided he didn't want to disobey any direct orders. He didn't want this man to hurt him. However even as he thought this, he knew that he wouldn't change his behavior. He couldn't, not even knowing the consequences...

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Mulder took a deep breath as Skinner ushered him into his office. It had been 6 weeks since their trip into the hills and really it was hard to believe that it had ever happened. Skinner was coolly polite to him at work, no special treatment, no mention of their agreement. Even so, 6 weeks later he was in big trouble. Mulder wasn't sure whether to be relieved or not that cigarette smoking man was in the room. Relieved he thought. Surely Skinner wouldn't give him that punishment he'd threatened while someone else was present? All the same, Skinner was hopping mad. Not that Mulder was surprised. Deserting his post, leaving the tape surveillance and skipping off to Puerto Rico to check out that observatory. There was

no way that Skinner was going to let him off the hook on this one. Mulder felt his stomach turn over inside. It had been a long time since his father had last whipped him but he could still remember the stinging stripes of the belt. Would Skinner use a belt, he wondered? Or some other instrument of torture? He shut those thoughts out of his mind. He didn't care - so long as he didn't lose his job.

In fact Skinner completely wrong-footed him. No mention of a beating, just a complete dressing down. Even when smoking man had left, Skinner just ordered him back to the tape surveillance. Mulder hesitated, wondering if he had missed something, but the expression in Skinner's eyes made it unwise to linger so he scooted from the room. He had got away with it! He should have felt pleased with himself but he didn't. He could cope with Skinner's anger better than he could cope with this sense of having disappointed the man, let him down in some way. Mulder chewed on his lip, trying to make sense of it and found that he couldn't. Damn Skinner! How had he managed to get into his head like this! Mulder flounced angrily around his apartment, throwing a ball around, trying not to think about the agreement they had made 6 weeks ago. Why was he so edgy? How had Skinner done this to him?

He was still feeling jittery when Skinner sent him off to investigate a mysterious death in a sewer in Newark. As he waded through that stinking raw sewage he suddenly understood what Skinner meant by "other methods of punishment." This was his punishment for Puerto Rico! Furious, he set off straight for Skinner's office.

"What's my next punishment? Scrubbing the bathroom floors with a toothbrush?" He asked his boss, fuming, not realising he was interrupting Skinner in a meeting. Skinner regarded him coldly, then allowed him into his office so that he could make a fool of himself in front of the people who were assembled there. After thoroughly humiliating himself, Mulder was finally allowed to leave. Damn, who needed a beating when he could do such a good job of punishing himself like this! It was all he could do to keep control of himself for the next few days as he solved the case, enduring a nightmarishly tense meeting in Skinner's office during which he expected to be reminded of their agreement at any second. He was glad when the whole thing was over, even if it did mean that he was back on tape surveillance.

He was relaxing in his apartment, trying to straighten out his tense muscles and even more tense thought processes when the knock on the door startled him. He felt his stomach churn as he opened the door to his boss.

"I suppose I should have expected you," he muttered, turning away and allowing the other man to come in.

"Not necessarily." Skinner shut the door. He was dressed in his work clothes and Mulder surmised that he had come straight from the office despite the lateness of the hour. "In fact, that's the problem, Mulder. You are going to have to relax about our agreement. It's interfering with your work."

"How can I relax?" Mulder cried. "When every time I screw up I expect you to bend me over your desk and beat the crap out of me?"

"Well that was the nature of our agreement. However I had no idea it would cause you such anxiety. Are you really so scared of being beaten, Mulder?" Skinner enquired, taking off his coat and jacket and sitting himself down on the couch without being asked.

"No, yes, I don't know! I just thought that after Puerto Rico...but nothing. Not a damn thing."

"Except the tape surveillance." Skinner pointed out.

"Yeah, but that wasn't what I expected."

"I don't have to give you what you expect," Skinner murmured. "I told you, these decisions are in my hands, not yours, Mulder."

"But I screwed up! And then again a couple of days ago. In front of all those people in your office. Oh, shit. Why did you let me in, sir? Why did you let me humiliate myself like that?"

"You seemed hell-bent on it, Mulder. It would have been hard to stop you. However you're right, I'm not happy about that. It seems to me that you're a bit jittery. Trying to anticipate me all the time, wondering when "it" will happen."

"You're right." Mulder sagged against the fish tank. "I can't take it."

"This from the man who ran 10 miles with blistered feet?" Skinner asked incredulously. "No, I think you can take it, Mulder. What you can't take is waiting for it. So I've come to put you out of your misery."

"Hey, you don't have to. I can pass on this! Don't do this for me." Mulder backed away in alarm. Skinner ignored him, getting up and glancing round the small apartment, lingering by the kitchen table.

"I'm not. I've been evaluating your behavior and really after disturbing me in my office like that and your general insolence, well I think you deserve to be punished, Mulder. Not severely - but just a taste of what you'll get if you really screw up."

"I'm not sure..." Mulder gulped nervously.

"Anytime you want to abandon our agreement, you just tell me." Skinner said seriously. "Otherwise, get yourself undressed and bent over the table." He tapped the kitchen table with his knuckles. "Yes, this'll do. Come on then, what's it to be?" He crossed his arms and stared at Mulder. Mulder stared back.

"All my clothes?" He asked in alarm.

"All your clothes." Skinner told him firmly. "I'll start off with your butt but on other occasions my attentions might stray elsewhere. You might as well get used to it." He waited while Mulder reluctantly slipped off his tee shirt, then unbuckled his belt and unzipped his

trousers, easing them down his thighs together with his boxer shorts. "Socks, Mulder." Skinner pointed out as a nearly naked Mulder began to walk over to the table.

"What? Oh." Mulder looked down and saw that he was still wearing his socks.

"It's just that you'll find yourself slipping all over the place if you wear them," Skinner told him.

"Right." Mulder took his socks off and gulped again. Of course, Skinner had seen him naked before but all the same, this was pretty humiliating. Which, he supposed, was precisely the effect that Skinner had intended. He stopped when he got to the table, suddenly hating this innocent piece of household furniture. Would he ever be able to eat off it again, he wondered?

"Mulder." Skinner put a gentle hand on each of his shoulders. "First time hurts like hell," he said, his dark eyes piercing in their intensity. "Don't be macho about it. Scream and holler if you like. I'll sort out the neighbors if they drop by to investigate. If it gets too bad I'll stick a handkerchief in your mouth to shut you up."

"Oh thanks." Mulder said sarcastically. Skinner shook his head.

"Humility, Mulder. You have an awful lot of learning to do, son. Now bend over the table and get ready. I can't see the point in handing out a beating if you don't make it hard, so I won't make this soft because it's a first time. I'll use my belt. Other times I might use something else so don't get too used to this. Other times might also go on longer or shorter, depending on what you've done and how angry you've made me. Disobeying direct orders is the worst though. You'll find me fairly uncompromising on those occasions. I won't ever break the skin but I will leave some pretty nasty welts and bruises. Don't expect to sit down for the next couple of days."

Mulder stood there, listening to this information with an outraged mind. He still couldn't quite believe he'd got himself into this position.

"Time to start, Mulder." Skinner unbuttoned his shirtsleeves and rolled them up tidily to his elbows. Then he unbuckled his belt and drew it slowly from his trousers. Mulder watched him, feeling like a rabbit caught in car headlights. "Mulder." Skinner said gently but sternly. "You do know that your behavior has been unacceptable don't you?" Mulder nodded. "And I was bound to be cross. You knew that didn't you? You were pushing me, trying to see how far you could go. Well this is how far. Now accept your punishment, Fox. It'll soon be over." Mulder took a deep breath and nodded, finally bending himself over the table, feeling the hard wooden edges dig into his thighs.

"Hold on tight. You'll find it easier that way." Skinner pushed Mulder forward more, so that his head was on the table, then placed a hand on the other man's back. Mulder took a deep breath and waited.

The first lick of the belt stunned his senses. He heard himself giving out a howl of horrified

pain. Skinner took no notice. Mulder didn't even notice the second lick - he was too busy getting over the first. But boy did he feel the third! It was like Skinner had just been getting into a rhythm with the first two. The third was like a flash of pure lightning against his buttocks and he screamed and struggled to get up. Skinner's hand kept him down.

"That's only three." Skinner said softly. "You have a long way to go yet, Mulder."

"I can't...please stop!" he whimpered wriggling under that big hand.

"No, Mulder. This is for your own good. Try and concentrate on how you ended up here and what you did to deserve it. That way you might avoid being in this position again." Skinner's tone implied that he thought this was unlikely. "I have no intention of letting you off this." He added and his voice had a note of finality in it that made Mulder stop wriggling. "So stop acting up and start accepting. You're not going anywhere." The next stroke thundered down across Mulder's backside with a sting of agony. Mulder actually sobbed, gasping for air. This couldn't be happening. He remembered his father's belt landing on his backside, but it had never hurt like this and it had been so long ago. Maybe he had been more resilient then or maybe his father hadn't swung so hard. He could feel the wood of the table bruising his thigh as he crashed into it, his body leaping like a fish with every harsh stroke.

"Do you know how many that is, Mulder?" Skinner asked him in that same, firm, reasonable tone of voice.

"No..." His own voice had a pathetic wavering tone to it.

"It's seven, Mulder. I'm not asking you to count this time but I might on another occasion. Try and keep track of it. I want you to concentrate on the pain."

"I can't concentrate on anything else." Mulder whimpered.

"Good. Think about it then, Mulder. Think about how much this hurts and how you can stay out of trouble in future." Skinner took a step back, his hand still holding Mulder down, then whipped the belt forward with a greater force than he had thus far used. Mulder shrieked, gasping to get oxygen into his lungs, failing as Skinner no longer spaced out the blows but delivered them all swiftly, one after the other onto Mulder's raw, bruised buttocks. Winded, Mulder accepted the stinging, biting blows, unable to do more than shiver and cry pathetically, yelping as each blow struck home, tears running copiously down his face, mingling with his sweat. Finally the onslaught stopped. He hurt so much that he didn't notice immediately, just lay there sobbing. Then he felt a gentle caress on his back.

"Alright, Mulder. That'll do for now. Just a light whipping." A light one? Light? Mulder couldn't believe it.

"It didn't feel light..." he complained, still sobbing. He heard a snort behind him.

"Well it was, Mulder, believe me. There's far worse in store for you in future. Trust me. Now get up, son, let's get you sorted out." And he helped Mulder to stand up, escorted him back

into the living room and laid him face down on the couch. Mulder looked back over his shoulder, saw the state of his buttocks and winced. "Light whipping my ass..." he murmured under his breath. Skinner brought him a glass of water and he downed it in one go, hating his boss for these small kindnesses after what he had just put him through.

"Now how do you feel?" Skinner perched beside him on the couch.

"Like shit." Mulder muttered into a cushion, the tears still coursing down his face. "I hate you. I hurt..." He was astonished to find his tears falling more heavily until he was sobbing his eyes out. He felt Skinner's hand on his bare shoulder, rubbing him gently.

"Okay, son. It's all over now," Skinner murmured.

"I do hate you." Mulder whimpered, then he found himself burying his face into the front of Skinner's shirt, clutching the other man's shoulders.

"Hate's a big word, Mulder." Skinner soothed his hair.

"I don't want this. I don't want you being nice..." Mulder sobbed. He couldn't remember his dad ever having been nice but at least his dad had let him go afterwards without subjecting him to any more lectures or wanting to chat to him or be nice. As soon as he was released after punishment, Mulder had chased out of the house and up into the treehouse. Sam usually found him there and offered him a cookie or a piece of cake, crushing it into his hand and watching him sympathetically until he stopped crying and ate the goodies she had brought. Skinner seemed to be playing the role of both his father and Sam, tormentor and comforter in one. He didn't know what to make of it.

"I told you, I intend to take good care of you," Skinner said. "You're one of mine now and I may get cross with you and I may punish you and hurt you but I'll always look out for you. Do you understand that, Fox?" Mulder looked up, trying to blink away the tears so he could look at his boss properly.

"I suppose so." He shook, still clinging to Skinner.

"No, I need more than that. I need you to understand." Skinner said, his hands still soothing on Mulder's back.

"I...yes." Mulder nodded, feeling comforted. "I understand."

"Good. Get dressed then, Mulder. We're going out."

"Out?" Mulder asked, confused. "Out where?"

"For a walk. I'm not leaving you like this. That isn't my style."

Skinner got up and handed Mulder his clothing, helping the other man to pull his boxers and trousers carefully over his sore backside and kneeling in front of Mulder to put his shoes and

socks on. Mulder allowed him to help, feeling a strange sense of trust for this man who had just hurt him so much.

Mulder was glad of the cold air on his face, drying his tears and soothing the heat from him. They walked up to a small hill, climbed it, then Skinner flung himself down on his back on the grass, looking up at the stars. Mulder settled himself down cautiously beside him, his backside protesting at anything approaching contact with even the softest surface.

"Are you always going to be this nice...um...afterwards?" he asked.

"I don't want you to fear me, Mulder." Skinner said. "However in answer to your question, no, I won't be. I have a feeling that sometimes I'm just going to be too angry. However it's when I decide not to bother correcting your behavior that you need to worry."

"Why? Sounds appealing..." Mulder murmured.

"Not really. Because the day I decide not to bother is the day I've given up on you." Skinner told him. "Right here and now I care about what happens to you. And I want you to use your head, stop being insolent, stop questioning my decisions and never again to take off at a moment's notice on some mad scheme. Will you try and do that for me?"

"I'll try." Mulder sniffed, privately not at all sure that he'd be able to manage it.

"Good. Because like I said, tonight was light. Another time you'll really know what's hit you. You took it well though, son. I'm proud of you." And he ruffled his hand through Mulder's hair.

Mulder couldn't make any sense of all this. It was like Skinner had got into his head. The man damn near took the skin off his backside and he felt pleased to have his company for god's sake? Yet he did. He lay back, enjoying Skinner's low tones as he pointed something out in the sky, mused on something, recounted some anecdote. Despite the pain he was in, Mulder couldn't help feeling a curious sense of peace

END OF PART 1

### Direct Orders by Xanthe

#### **Author's Notes:**

Set after *Ascension*. Skinner's direct orders have been disobeyed and we all know how he feels about that. Krycek gets a spanking too in this one!

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Assistant Director Skinner watched Agent Mulder, taking in the shadows under the other man's tired eyes, the stubble on his chin, the haunting, haunted expression on his face. Skinner's own expression didn't change. He was a quiet, astute man and he didn't like to give too much away. He was sure that Mulder didn't even know that he was watching him. However he didn't like to see one of his agents in so much emotional turmoil. Mulder was one of his, one of a very select group of agents that Skinner took a personal interest in and Skinner took his duties very seriously indeed. Mulder was in pain, in trouble and in need of some rest and Skinner had every intention of making sure that he got some. He could understand Mulder's reluctance to let go of the investigation into Agent Scully's disappearance, but even so, Mulder was in no condition to be of any use in the investigation. Someone had to take care of the man - he was quite clearly incapable of taking care of himself. Skinner was too busy working on the case himself to see that Mulder got home safely and took the rest that Skinner had ordered him to, so he appointed Krycek instead. It made him uneasy, placing Mulder in the hands of this new young agent - someone that Skinner could not vouch for, but he had little alternative.

When he had finished in the meeting, Skinner called Krycek into his office.

"Did you see that Mulder went home?" He asked.

"Yes, sir." Krycek nodded.

"Don't lie to me, Krycek." Skinner growled. "You don't know me all that well, son. I don't take kindly to being lied to."

"Sir?" Krycek had the grace to look embarrassed.

"When I give an order I expect it to be obeyed, Agent Krycek. I asked you to ensure that Mulder got home safely, but after having checked up on him I find out that he ditched you within about 30 seconds of you both leaving my office. Do you have an explanation for that?"

"Well, sir, he said he was going to go home and sleep. Short of actually escorting him home myself and tucking him up in bed, what was I to do?" Krycek shrugged helplessly. All this fuss over goddamn Mulder. Who cared?

"Exactly that, Krycek. Taken him home, tucked him in, handcuffed him to the bed for all I care." Skinner growled. Krycek played with that mental image for a while, finding it rather pleasing. Then he noticed the thunderous expression on Skinner's face and he shook himself back into reality. "It's hard when your partner goes missing." Skinner continued. "Agent Mulder is under a lot of stress right now. If he makes any mistakes because he's not had enough sleep then I'll hold you responsible, Krycek."

"Me?" Krycek gasped. This was ridiculous. It was bad enough having to tag along behind Mulder as it was but serving two masters was even more difficult. One minute he had smoking man breathing down his neck and the next it was Skinner. Keeping them both satisfied was going to be a harder task than he had anticipated.

"Yes, you." Skinner stated firmly. "I don't know much about you, Krycek and right now I don't have the time to find out any more. Strictly speaking I wouldn't consider you to be one of my special agents. However, we find ourselves thrown together and so I should warn you - I don't take kindly to sloppy work. I also don't take kindly to being disobeyed and I

especially don't take kindly to being lied to. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." Krycek replied bitterly.

"Good. Now keep an eye on Mulder and don't let him do anything he shouldn't. If you do, you'll answer to me. And I don't have much patience with green young agents who don't do as they're told. Understood?"

"Understood." Krycek nodded and hurried out of the room, feeling as unnerved as he did after a meeting with his other boss. This assignment was rapidly turning into a nightmare.

He found Mulder and wanted to punch the other man as soon as look at him. He had been placed in an impossible situation. Mulder didn't listen to anyone, certainly not to him. Krycek could tell that Mulder didn't have the least respect or liking for him. It was obvious. And he'd tried his best to be charming as well - it was one of the reasons why he had been chosen for this mission. His charm was quite legendary and he was well aware of it. He had learned how to flash his eyes and smile winsomely even as he told the most deadly of lies. Until Mulder. Until Skinner. They both seemed immune to his charm and Krycek wasn't sure which of them he hated most. He found himself listening to Mulder outline an absurd scheme about setting off for Skyland Mountain. His real boss would want him to go with Mulder. His pseudo-boss had already made it clear that he'd do something very unpleasant to him if he allowed Mulder to run off chasing things while he was in this condition. He knew which boss he should fear the most - the one who would have no compunction about putting a bullet in his head, but all the same, he wasn't keen on upsetting the other one either.

"What about Skinner?" Krycek squawked to Mulder, wondering why his meeting with the ex-marine still bothered him so much.

"I'll deal with Skinner." Mulder said confidently. None too reassured, Krycek found himself following on behind his so-called "partner".

It's more likely to be the other way round, Mulder thought to himself as he set off in the car with the reluctant Krycek in tow. Instead of him dealing with Skinner, he was pretty sure that it would be Skinner who would deal with him, probably by applying the buckle end of his belt to Mulder's ass. Mulder didn't care. Nothing was going to stop him risking his life to find Scully. Nothing. Not even the thought of the worst whipping in the goddamn universe. He'd deal with that later and he'd deal with Skinner later. Right now he needed to do something, anything, to convince himself that Scully was still alive.

Mulder could have wept with frustration as he came so close to finding Scully and failed. He found himself hating Duane Barry with a vengeance, and hating Alex Krycek too. The man was always there, hovering and Mulder had a sudden awful fear that if Scully never returned he would be stuck with Krycek forever. He was almost relieved when he heard the cars draw up and discovered that his boss had arrived. Relieved and apprehensive. Even as tired and distraught as he was, Mulder could see that Skinner was not in a good mood. His boss swept into the room, regarded him with icily angry eyes, seemed about to move on and then stopped.

"Agent Mulder, you disobeyed my direct order," he stated coldly. Mulder felt his stomach

contract. He didn't reply - the statement hadn't required any reply. It had merely been Skinner's way of telling him that he was going to be punished and punished hard for his disobedience. But not yet. It was a warning, Skinner telling him to prepare himself, Skinner informing him that he was seriously pissed off and that when the time was right he'd show him just how pissed off he was. In private and painfully.

Skinner insisted on Mulder traveling with him on the return journey to Washington. Mulder was too tired and knew that he was in too much trouble to even bother protesting. Besides, he was relieved not to have to drive back with Krycek for company. Something about that man seriously unnerved him.

"Agent Mulder I suggest that you take this opportunity to get some rest seeing as how you disobeyed my last order on that subject." Skinner told him tersely. "You and I have some matters to discuss when we get back."

"We could discuss them now..." Mulder began hopefully, wanting to get the lecture out of the way.

"I want you rested for our "discussion", Mulder. You're going to need your strength." Skinner informed him. "So I suggest that you get some sleep." And he refused to utter another word for the rest of the journey. Not that it mattered. Mulder was so tired that he did as he was told and fell instantly asleep.

Skinner dropped him off at his apartment a couple of hours later.

"I'll see you in my office at 7 am, Agent Mulder," he said. "Stay at home and sleep until then. That, incidentally, is another order."

"Yes, sir." Mulder climbed out of the car, pretended to go to his apartment, watched as Skinner drove off, and then set off for Quantico.

Skinner glanced at his watch and frowned. Ten past seven and still no sign of Agent Mulder.

"Alright, Krycek, let's start without him," he said. Krycek swallowed and nodded. Tell him the "truth", he thought to himself. Isn't that what his boss had told him to do? Back Mulder's story up. "I'm not happy." Skinner regarded Krycek with a cool frown. "I'm not happy with your performance, Agent Krycek."

"Yes sir, sorry sir." Krycek tried to look dutifully subdued and contrite but he knew almost immediately that he had miscalculated.

"Don't posture and pose for me, boy!" Skinner roared, slamming his hand down on his desk. "Damn it, Krycek, I told you to keep an eye on Mulder, not tag along for the ride while he disobeys every order I give him. I trusted you to keep charge of the situation but you didn't and now I have a dead man on my hands and Agent Mulder has been accused of having some involvement in that death. Now I know and you know, that Agent Mulder is innocent. I don't doubt him for a second, but there are some people who I'm going to have a hard job convincing. What do you have to say about that, Krycek?"

"Agent Mulder is a very determined man, sir." Krycek shrugged, feeling a wave of envy at Skinner's unswerving faith in Mulder's innocence. He wished his own boss had such a high regard for him. He tried to hide the anger, to keep the bitterness from his eyes but he wasn't sure he succeeded. He had the feeling that Assistant Director Skinner was a very perceptive man and that made him uneasy.

"So am I, Krycek. So am I!" Skinner told him.

Krycek winced. He wanted to get out of this meeting as soon as possible. He felt that his position in the Bureau was becoming dangerous. As soon as he could he was going to slip away from all this, get out of town, await more orders. In the meantime, if he could just sweet-talk Skinner into believing his story. That was what his other boss wanted.

Skinner got up, went around to where Krycek sat and glared at the other man.

"I don't know what to make of you, Krycek," he said, his dark eyes boring deep into the younger man's. "You're...an enigma, boy."

"Yes, sir." Krycek's eyes flashed angrily.

"Ah, so you object to being called 'boy'?" Skinner asked, still standing too close.

"No, sir."

"Another lie." Skinner took hold of Krycek's chin and held him still, forcing Krycek to meet his eyes. "You do lie very prettily, Krycek but you're hiding something. I don't trust you."

"Let go of me!" Krycek lost control and twisted out of Skinner's grasp, thudding his fist in the general direction of the other man's face and then finding himself, much to his surprise, lying flat on his stomach bent over Skinner's desk, the other man's bulk leaning down on him.

"That at least was honest." Skinner said. "But you've annoyed me now, Krycek. I don't take kindly to acts of aggression against me in my own office. You've picked on the wrong man to play games with. Still, I like your fire. I suspected that innocent exterior of yours hid something deeper and now I know. Do you want me to take you on, Krycek? I will if you ask nicely." He leaned close, his hot breath whispering against Krycek's ear. "I sense that you're the sort of man who responds to a firm hand, Krycek. Is that so?"

"I..." Krycek found himself panting, unable to move under Skinner's huge body. He went limp, considering his options.

His smoking boss would tell him to go along with whatever Skinner wanted in order to finish this mission. But what was it that Skinner wanted? And was he right? Krycek knew there was a side of himself that responded to men like Skinner. All his life he had been getting away with things, playing games with people, stringing them along, deceiving them with his easy charm, his sly lies, his ability to appear so innocent and beguiling. He had been an only child, much indulged by his parents who refused to believe him capable of any wrongdoing, but all the time he had wanted to find out where the limits were, to be told when to stop. Nobody had ever told him. Not even smoking man who simply rejoiced in Krycek's capacity for evil

and used the younger man's deceitfulness for his own ends, making it his own. But Skinner saw right through him. Skinner was the father he had longed for, the boss he wished he had, the one thing that had been missing from his life for as long as he could remember: someone who understood him, who saw the darkness inside him and told him that it didn't matter. That he'd be protected anyway, that he'd be cared for, looked after, just as long as he accepted Skinner's authority, as long as he behaved and didn't try to lie to Skinner. He could turn back from this path he had chosen a long time ago, renounce his past, be what Skinner wanted. It wasn't too late - was it?

"Well?" Skinner asked, his hand heavy between Krycek's shoulder blades. "What is it you want, boy? You want me to look out for you? Take you under my wing?"

"Yes, sir. Yes. Please..." He whispered that pathetically. He did want it. He wanted it more than anything else in the world. If Skinner were on his side he'd be alright. He wouldn't lie or cheat or deceive again. He'd be free of this whole mess he'd gotten himself into. Skinner would sort everything out - he'd get him back from the consortium, he'd buy his soul back from the devil, he'd...oh dream on, Alex, he told himself.

"Maybe you don't understand." Skinner spoke in low, measured tones. "If you want my support, Alex, you have to earn it. And that could be painful."

"I don't care." Krycek shivered.

"You might care when I start punishing you." Skinner said. "Do you agree to be punished, Alex? Because I think discipline is exactly what you need." Krycek closed his eyes.

"Yes," he whispered. At last. Somebody who would tell him when to stop. Someone to put an end to the wearying round of lies and deception.

"Okay."

Krycek felt the other man lift his hand, allowing him up. Skinner turned him round to face him, staring into his eyes for a long time. "Is there anything else you want to tell me, Krycek, before we begin? Anything else I should know?"

"I...no..." Krycek stared at his feet, couldn't meet Skinner's piercing dark eyes. Skinner sighed inwardly. This man was going to be a harder case to crack than even Agent Mulder was. He needed what Skinner could give him badly. What dark truth was he carrying around inside him? And how much had it embittered him? Skinner knew that he had to act hard and fast to break into Krycek's soul and find out if there was anything good left in there at all. He crossed the room and locked the door.

"Get your trousers off," he said. "I'm going to thrash you." Krycek stared at him, open-mouthed. "You've never been thrashed before have you?" Skinner asked. Krycek shook his head numbly. "I'm going to." Skinner told him firmly. "You're still a child inside aren't you Alex? Greedy, grabbing, selfish. I'm going to give you a punishment suitable for a child. Now get your trousers off and bend over my desk. Or leave this office now. Your choice."

"If I go..." Krycek paused, glanced at the door. "If I go, you won't take care of me or look out for me...will you?"

"No." Skinner shrugged. "But you're not really one of mine, Alex. I wouldn't consider this usually but there's something about you. Of all the men I've had under my command, only one other has ever needed this sort of discipline more."

"Who was that?" Krycek asked, delaying his decision, glancing at the door again.

"That's private." Skinner snapped. "I don't discuss details." Even as he said it, Krycek knew that Skinner had been referring to Mulder. It couldn't be anyone else. He remembered the way he had noticed Skinner watching Mulder, the stern set of his jaw tempered by the concern in his eyes. He wanted to feel that concern directed at him. He wanted to be one of Skinner's protégés, he wanted it badly. He didn't care what the price was.

"You don't really want to go do you, Alex?" Skinner said softly.

"No." Krycek whispered. "But I don't want to be hurt either."

"You'll survive." Skinner opened his desk drawer and pulled out a long wooden ruler. He laid it on the desk and rolled up his shirt sleeves. "Over the desk, Alex," he said firmly. Without knowing why he was agreeing to this, or even when he had, Krycek undid his trousers as he had been commanded, slipped them off and bent over the desk. He didn't even gasp in surprise when he felt Skinner pull down his boxer shorts. It seemed inevitable somehow.

"You can scream. It's early." Skinner shrugged, knowing there wouldn't be many people around. "However, I'll think more highly of you if you keep quiet on this occasion."

Krycek ground his teeth together. He wanted Skinner to think highly of him. It was all he wanted.

His resolve went out the window with the first blow. Alex had been punched a few times, shot once, but never spanked with a heavy wooden ruler. It winded him completely and he lay there dazed. The second stroke made him realise that the first hadn't been a one-off. They were all going to hurt this much. He closed his eyes and stuffed his knuckles in his mouth in a desperate attempt not to cry out. Skinner laid them on hard and fast, covering every inch of his bare ass and Krycek fought an inner battle with the pain and humiliation, his determination not to scream warring with the sheer agony of the beating he was enduring. Skinner kept him held down which was a relief. If he hadn't Krycek was sure he would have got up and he didn't want Skinner to think that he couldn't take it, even though he was sure that he couldn't, not another stroke. Finally it was over. Krycek felt as if his weak knees would buckle underneath him at any second. Skinner helped him up and he struggled to pull his boxers back over his sore buttocks, accepted his trousers when Skinner handed them to him, hoping that his face wasn't too red, that he wasn't crying too hard, that Skinner didn't think he was weak.

Skinner stood there, sighing inside. He had failed. Krycek had endured a hard beating but still he hadn't cracked. Inside there was still some nugget of darkness that Skinner couldn't even begin to guess at. He put a tender hand on each of Krycek's shoulders and looked at the other man.

"Alex, there is something else you want to tell me, isn't there?" he said gently, insistently.

"I..." Krycek looked into those stern dark eyes and wanted to tell him. He wanted to bury his

face in Skinner's big chest and tell him everything - about the consortium, smoking man, his orders regarding Mulder. But if he did, what would Skinner think of him? Skinner would hate him, would turn away from him, withdraw that support. He couldn't do it. He didn't want Skinner to see inside his soul and hate him. If Skinner didn't know then he wouldn't hate him, even if that meant leaving here and never coming back. "No, sir," he said, taking a deep breath, his eyes unable to meet Skinner's gaze any more.

"Alex." Skinner shook the young man's shoulders. "I can't help you unless you tell me," he said insistently. "It doesn't matter what it is. Once you belong to me, I'll stand by you. There is nothing you can tell me that will make me turn away from you."

"I want..." Krycek opened his mouth, stared hopelessly at Skinner, then shook his head, backing away. "It's too late," he whispered. "You found me too late." He slid over to the door, opened it and fled from the room, feeling his failure rotting inside him, destroying him from the inside out.

Skinner stared after the man feeling a great sense of sadness. He could have helped. He would have helped. He had meant every word he said. He could have pulled Alex Krycek back from the brink of whatever abyss he stood on and he would have done as well. If Krycek had only trusted him. Damn! What a waste! Skinner threw himself back down in his chair in annoyance. And now there was Mulder to deal with as well. That wouldn't be easy. Skinner had no intention of handing out a punishment to Mulder while he was still in this emotionally distraught state. For now, he would be the staunchest ally Mulder could wish for in the FBI. Later though, when Mulder had recovered physically and mentally from this ordeal, well later Mulder would know he had upset him, that was for sure. Skinner picked up his phone and made a call.

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Mulder lay back in the car seat and dozed, trying to mentally add together all the crimes he had committed recently. There had been the disobeying the direct order thing, actually he'd done that twice, or was that three times? He'd lost count. Then there had been racing off to Skyland Mountain without telling anyone and there had been his general insolence although he rather hoped Skinner might forgive him that as he had been very tired at the time.

Although he'd only been tired because he had pursued a case that Skinner told him to drop, refused to rest when Skinner ordered him to...maybe Skinner wouldn't forgive the insolence after all. Still Skinner had trusted him enough to give him back the X Files. That at least had been a reward for all he had suffered. He opened his eyes a fraction, regarded his boss as if hoping to judge his mood, but it was useless of course. Skinner kept a tight control over his emotions and his facial expressions never gave anything away. Mulder closed his eyes again and sighed. He was feeling fine, fully recovered. Now that Scully had been returned to him he felt at peace. Nothing could upset that inner calm, not even the certain knowledge that before this weekend was out he would have to endure the most severe punishment for all his crimes. It was getting dark as they arrived at the cabin. It was situated at the end of a long, winding, deserted road. Mulder was dimly aware that this was probably a good thing. Nobody to hear him scream.

Skinner had allowed him a couple of weeks to enjoy Scully's return and then he had dropped by his apartment. Mulder had expected to receive the worst there and then, but Skinner merely informed him that the pair of them were going to take off into the hills again.

"More running?" Mulder enquired.

"Not this time, Mulder." Skinner told him seriously. "Just some catching up on unfinished business. That alright with you?" Mulder took a deep breath and nodded.

"I was expecting it," he said.

"Good. Just don't anticipate it too much. I want to enjoy a weekend out of town so I don't want you jumpy the whole time."

"I'll try my best." Mulder said.

So here they were. Skinner stopped the jeep and went to open the cabin. Mulder got their bags out. This was weird. A sort of punishment weekend with the boss. He wondered when the punishment part of it would begin but then stopped himself. Skinner had told him not to anticipate and it was hard, but his boss was right. Worrying about it was worse than the real thing when it came. He had known what he was doing when he had disobeyed his boss and he couldn't complain now that it was over. Not considering the strings Skinner had pulled to make sure that the double-crossing Krycek was being held accountable for Barry's death and not him. Mulder was sure that was where the blame should lie, but even so, how many other bosses would have given him the benefit of so many doubts? It was dark in the hills and chilly. Skinner lit the fire and pointed Mulder to his room.

"Mine's the one opposite," he said, "bathroom's down the hallway and kitchen's through here. I'll heat us up some supper."

"Not fresh fish I suppose?" Mulder queried.

"Haven't had time to catch any." Skinner replied. "Brought along a load of groceries though." He began unpacking some essentials.

It was an enjoyable evening. Mulder was determined to be relaxed and after an hour or so he stopped jumping every time Skinner made a movement. Skinner was his usual straight-faced, enigmatic self but Mulder liked that about him. You always knew where you were with Skinner, which was a relief after spending time with a man like Krycek. He knew that at some point this weekend Skinner was going to hurt him. Badly. And he knew that afterwards Skinner would take care of him. He knew that Skinner was angry with him, but he knew at the same time that he wasn't so angry that he would lose control. And that once the punishment was out of the way, he would never again hear a word of reproach from his boss on the matter. The punishment wiped out the sin forever. Although there was always the next sin of course...

After dinner Skinner packed him off to bed.

"Early start tomorrow," he warned. Mulder nodded, wondering what to expect.

Skinner woke him up at 6am and pushed him in the direction of the shower. "Up, Mulder, get moving," he said insistently as Mulder tried to shake the sleep out of his eyes. They set off in darkness, getting into the jeep and starting a long, slow climb, high into the hills. Mulder wondered where he was being taken. They stopped just after daybreak at a beautiful little glade surrounded by trees. A stream ran down into a mini-waterfall which dripped into a still azure pool.

"Get your clothes off, Mulder," Skinner said, unpacking a bag from the jeep.

"We going for a swim?" Mulder queried, trying to fight down the panic in his stomach.

"No." Skinner turned his back on him and Mulder gulped, watching as Skinner unpacked two crampons from his bag and began hammering them into one of the trees at about...just above head height. Then he pulled out a tarpaulin and fastened that round the tree. Mulder wondered why he did that. "I don't like to be kept waiting." Skinner turned back to Mulder with a grim frown, noticing that Mulder had not yet begun to undress. With a nervous fumbling, Mulder started to strip off. As he did so, he watched out of the corner of his eye as Skinner pulled out two leather cuffs from his bag. He gasped in dismay when he set eyes on the whip that Skinner pulled out next.

"Don't worry." Skinner saw the alarm in his eyes. "It's not much different to the belt. Just looks worse. It's not very long. Long whips are hard to aim and I like to be exact."

"This is going to be bad isn't it?" Mulder said unsteadily.

"Did you expect anything else?" Skinner asked him. Mulder shook his head, looking around the beautiful clearing.

"But it's so pretty out here," he whispered.

"It'll still be pretty. Even when you're screaming." Skinner told him. "Which you can do incidentally, as much as you like. There's nobody for miles around so don't feel like you have to hold back."

"Right." Mulder pulled off the last item of his clothing and stood there, feeling stupid to be naked on this cool morning in the middle of nowhere, next to a babbling brook and beside this stern, fully clothed man who was about to whip him half senseless.

"Okay. Put these on." Skinner handed him the cuffs. Mulder thought it was odd to be asked to be so complicit in one's own torture in this way, yet he found himself obeying all the same. He buckled each cuff on his wrist and then showed the result to Skinner.

"Tighter." Skinner told him. "Another notch. You'll find it holds you better that way. You'll be more comfortable. They're nicely padded so you shouldn't feel any pain from them." Mulder nodded and tightened the cuffs, feeling his stomach flipping over inside like a pancake.

"Okay." Skinner nodded when he was satisfied. "Now just to let you know what to expect.

Today is going to be tough, son, but I promise I'll make up for it tomorrow. Tomorrow there'll be no pain, nothing to worry about. I thought I'd get it over with early on - I know how you fret away at things." Mulder wondered if he was supposed to be grateful for that. "Today however, is going to be pretty bad." Skinner told him, his dark eyes unreadable. "I mean that, Mulder. I'm going to break you down into little pieces. This isn't going to be quick, or light. It'll be the hardest thing you've ever had to endure. But you will endure it because I'll make you. There's no way out from here on in unless you want to end it before it begins. Your choice. I've told you before, any time you want to end our agreement you can."

"But I...that is, you've already backed me up, supported me, given me back the X Files..." Mulder muttered.

"And you think I'd take those things back if you don't agree to this?" Skinner raised an eyebrow. "You don't know me very well then, Fox. I wouldn't do that. Now what's it to be?" Mulder was scared, really scared.

"I'm not sure I can endure all that stuff you were saying, if it's as bad as you say it'll be. I'll disappoint you..." he began.

"No. I don't think you will." Skinner said thoughtfully. "Shall we begin?" Mulder nodded, his whole body trembling with fear. "Relax." Skinner ran his hands over Mulder's bare arms. "Trust me."

Mulder nodded again, calming down. He followed Skinner over to the tree and allowed the other man to attach the cuffs to the crampons he had hammered in. "These aren't to restrain you, Fox." Skinner told him. "Because I'm sure that if I told you to stand here and accept this then you would. But it would be harder for you that's all. The cuffs will hold you up, make it easier."

He stepped back from Mulder and got out the whip, swinging it through the air a couple of times. Mulder flinched but the whip didn't go anywhere near him.

"Alright, Fox. Concentrate." Skinner said. "I told you before, I won't break the skin. It'll be like last time except this time I'm a lot angrier. Count the strokes out loud for me. I'm going to be going really slow."

Mulder tensed as he waited for the first stinging blow, his body flailing against the tree as he felt it lick against his thigh. It wasn't as bad as he had feared - no worse than the belt. He was sure he could take this. He would have to take it.

"Count." Skinner reminded him patiently.

"One." He breathed.

"Okay. Now think, Fox. When you ran off, got yourself into knots, disobeyed me - did it get Agent Scully back?"

"I..." Mulder thought about it. A second blow descended on his back, across his shoulders and he lost his train of thought.

"Well?" Skinner asked.

"I don't know. I suppose not." Mulder said.

"No, I meant what's the count? I expect the answer to the other question will be longer coming to you." Skinner informed him.

"Oh, two." Mulder said, pondering on that last statement.

A third stroke whipped across his buttocks and he yelped. That one had been harder.

"Three," he said quickly.

Skinner was right about being slow. He gave Mulder ample time to get his breath back, to holler and yell and scream and weep and sag against the cuffs on his wrists. Now Mulder understood why Skinner had fastened the tarpaulin to the tree as he found himself thrown against it by the force of the strokes. He could feel the lumpy bark underneath him, but the tarpaulin meant that the tree's rough surface didn't harm the front of his body. After 10 strokes Skinner stopped and came over to Mulder, put some water against the other man's lips and Mulder downed it greedily.

"Any more thoughts on that question I asked you earlier?" Skinner wanted to know, waiting by Mulder's shoulder.

"Well...I had to go after Scully. She's my partner." Mulder said, a bit sulkily. He didn't regret anything he had done. He would do it all again tomorrow.

"I understand that." Skinner said. "But did disobeying my orders, rushing off to Skyland Mountain - did any of that get Scully back?"

"No, but..." Mulder sighed.

"Two men died, Fox." Skinner said softly. "The tram operator and Duane Barry. If you hadn't disobeyed me they might both still be alive."

"I don't believe..." Mulder paused. Maybe Skinner had a point.

"Just think about it."

Skinner took a step back, raised the whip and brought it forwards again.

"Shit!" Mulder struggled in his bonds for a moment, realising that Skinner had just upped the ante. The first strokes had been bearable because Skinner had been holding back. Now he was letting rip.

"Count please." Skinner said.

"Eleven." Mulder whimpered.

"I'm not punishing you for your loyalty to Agent Scully." Skinner told him. "Because I would

expect that. I'm punishing you for your disobedience towards me. Do you understand the difference?"

"Yes." Mulder sobbed.

Another flash of lightning across his shoulders and he shrieked.

"Twelve," he mumbled.

"Say it loud and clear, Fox, or I'll repeat the stroke. I'll repeat any stroke I can't hear called from now on and I won't prompt you any more either. Don't get the count wrong. I find that...irritating." Skinner whipped his arm forward once more and Mulder found himself slamming into the tree. Skinner frowned.

"You'll cause yourself more damage than necessary if you do that," he said going over to his bag and taking out a length of rope. He crossed over to Mulder and fastened the rope around Mulder's waist so that he was tied firmly to the tree. "That should keep you steady." He paused, sighing. "I'm waiting," he said.

"Thirteen, sorry." Mulder croaked.

"Hmm." Skinner resumed his position and lashed another stroke down across Mulder's buttocks.

"Fourteen." Mulder said quickly. His whole body felt as if it was being devoured by licking tongues of flame. There didn't seem to be any part of him that didn't sting. How much longer would this go on for? Skinner had implied that it would be a long time but how much did he think Mulder could take? The strokes came faster now, one after the other in quick succession until Mulder forgot to count one.

"That was 17." Skinner provided for him. "But we'll do number 17 again until you count it."

He stroked the whip hard over Mulder's shoulders in a vicious caress.

"17!" Mulder yelled. "17!"

"Good. Any more thoughts on that question?" The whip took Mulder's senses away and he barely managed to call out "18" before the next blow crashed into him.

"19" he murmured weakly, wondering if Skinner would stop at 20.

He didn't. He did stop at 22 though, for some inexplicable reason of his own. Then he went and unfastened Mulder from the tree and led him over to the pool.

"Go in. Cool down," he instructed. "I'll get us some breakfast."

Mulder enjoyed the feeling of the cold water on his hot, aching body. It hadn't been too bad. He'd survived. It was over! He began to hum to himself, ducking his head under the water and splashing around noisily. Breakfast was bacon and eggs cooked over an open fire.

Mulder marveled at the way Skinner seemed to have all the right equipment for this outdoor living.

He knocked back a cup of coffee that Skinner had brewed and lay on his side, trying to ignore the insistently painful whisper of the stripes on his skin against the rough fabric of the blanket he was wrapped in.

"Such a pretty glade!" Mulder stared at the birds in the trees, feeling oddly at peace with the world.

"Hmm." Skinner grunted. "You're looking a bit more relaxed, Mulder."

"Yeah, well, it's all over now." Mulder sighed dreamily and then felt a sudden sensation of imminent danger. He sat up, wincing. "Oh shit. It isn't is it?" He asked looking at Skinner.

"Sorry, son." Skinner shook his head and took a sip of his coffee. "To be honest we've only just begun. I anticipate this taking most of the day. On and off."

"What?" Mulder was aghast. "I can't take any more!" He protested.

"Oh you can. You can take considerably more than this!" Skinner seemed amused. "The whip's thin - it stings a bit but it's not going on heavy, Mulder. You don't have anywhere near the amount of marks you had when I used the belt. I chose this whip on purpose because I knew I'd probably have to keep at it for a long while."

"Please, sir." Mulder whimpered pathetically. "I don't know what it is you want from me, but you can't expect me to take this all day! It's only what?" He glanced at Skinner's watch. "10 o'clock?" he queried.

"That's right." Skinner nodded. "We got here at dawn, we'll stay here until sundown. Longer if that's what it takes."

"If that's what it takes to do what?" Mulder queried. "What is it you want to achieve?"

"Firstly to punish you." Skinner sighed. "That much I've surely made clear. But also to see if we can get some sense into you as well. That's the harder part."

"I see sense. I do." Mulder told him. "You were right. I shouldn't have disobeyed you. I promise I won't do it again."

Skinner gave one of his rare smiles, lifting an ironic eyebrow.

"Don't be silly, Mulder," he chided. "Now, time to start up again. Get yourself ready."

Mulder thought he would burst into tears. He could feel himself sulking and pouting and he knew that wouldn't do him any favors with Skinner but all the same he couldn't stop himself.

"I hate you," he muttered as he got to his feet.

"Oh I wondered when we'd start that again." Skinner shook his head. "It doesn't work on me, Mulder. Your feelings are duly noted, registered and ignored. Shall we continue?"

The next few hours counted as the longest of Mulder's life. Skinner was agonisingly slow in his attentions, spreading out the whiplashes and interspersing them with a series of long lectures. Sometimes he would go as long as twenty minutes without using the whip,

standing behind Mulder all the while, talking to him in that low tone of his. Mulder would just about relax when an unexpected blow would fall somewhere on his body, making him scream with the shock of it, fraying his nerves.

"So, explain it to me again, Mulder. Exactly what was going through your mind when you took off to Skyland Mountain?"

"Just that I had to find Scully." Mulder whimpered, hanging against the tree. "42."

"Good. And did you think that what you were doing was in direct defiance of my orders to you, removing you from the case?"

"Yes." Mulder rasped as the next stinging blow struck home. "43. Yes I did think that."

"Did Krycek try to stop you?"

"44. Shit! No. Not really. He said something about you and I said..."

"You said?"

"Fuck! 45. I told him not to worry about it, that I'd deal with you." Mulder sobbed.

"Oh really?" The next blow seemed to tear half the skin off Mulder's back - or at least that's what it felt like.

"46..." Mulder sagged.

"And this is what you call "dealing with me," I suppose?" Skinner queried.

"NO! 48, 47! I don't know. 47. Um, no, I knew you'd have my hide but I just didn't care at the time."

"Do you care now?"

"48! Yes. I care now! Yes I goddamn care now. Please stop, please!"

"Not yet, Fox. A few more. You can take a few more can't you?"

"No, I damn well can't."

"You have to." Skinner stroked the whip back again. Mulder shuddered.

"49."

"The time to start worrying is when you stop feeling them." Skinner told him. "That's when you know you've had enough. I'm being very gentle with you though. You aren't really suffering anywhere near as much as you think you are."

"50!" Mulder gasped. "It doesn't feel like that from where I'm standing."

"No. Well, you lack perspective. That, I think, is your problem." Skinner commented. He lashed another 3 down in quick succession and then returned to the tree and untied Mulder again. "Into the pool." He gestured with his head, his face as unsmiling as ever. "Then more food?"

Mulder sighed and nodded.

Maybe Skinner was right he thought to himself as he allowed the cool water to wash over him. When he surveyed his bruised skin he could see that it wasn't as bad as he imagined it to be. The whip hurt, it really stung in fact, but it didn't seem to be heavy enough to really cause any serious damage. "What an evil bastard he is", Mulder muttered to himself resentfully. "Choosing that whip on purpose so he could go on at me all day like this. God I

hate him." He ducked under the water, wishing that were true. But he didn't hate Skinner. He never had. He just wanted the other man to like him, to look out for him, to protect him from the consequences of his actions. And if this was the price he had to pay...Mulder sighed. This definitely was the price he had to pay and he was prepared to pay it.

"Shall we take a break?" Skinner asked after lunch as they lay back in a surprisingly companionable silence. Surprising, Mulder thought, when you considered that one of them was butt naked under a blanket and the other one had been whipping his ass all morning.

"No arguments here!" Mulder said. "Any time you want to take a permanent break, that'll be fine too!"

"I don't think so." Skinner told him, his eyes as dark and inscrutable as ever. "We're getting there, Fox, but we're not quite there yet. Get dressed. We'll go for a walk."

What was it about this guy and walks, fresh air, campfires and all this survivalist crap, Mulder thought to himself as they wandered through the trees? It wasn't normal for a man to be so into these things. If this was what a military training did for you then he was glad that he'd never undergone it. He tried to keep up such bitter little thoughts but it wasn't easy. The truth was that Skinner was just so goddamn nice! One minute he was beating him to a pulp and the next he was escorting him through the forest, talking to him quietly as if he didn't intend to attach him to a tree and start all over again when they got back to the glade. Mulder shivered at that thought. His clothes felt strange against his skin and he hurt all over. It was only early afternoon but he felt tired.

"Not used to the fresh air." Skinner grinned at him. "It always knocks me out when I come out here, straight from the city."

"You don't seem very knocked out," Mulder commented sourly.

"Don't be sulky, son." Skinner told him with a warning look. "I hate sulkers. Whatever I put you through today, I do for your own good."

"Well it sure doesn't seem that way." Mulder couldn't help himself. He knew his tone was antagonistic but his back and buttocks felt raw, the fabric of his clothes rubbing against them.

Skinner stopped, his body stiffening.

"Mulder, you want some home truths?" He asked. "I've been holding back until now, but I'm happy to let go whenever you push me hard enough."

"I..." Mulder stopped and considered this. "No. I'm just tired and I hurt."

"Fair enough." Skinner shrugged. "I can make allowances for that." His expression softened.

"I'm sorry, son, you should rest up. I brought you up here because there's something I thought you'd like to see. Not much further. You can walk a little way more, can't you?"

"Um, yes." Mulder nodded. He pulled himself together and followed on without complaining. The last thing he wanted was to alienate Skinner completely. He was totally at this man's mercy so it wouldn't be wise.

"Ssh." Skinner waved a hand. "You sure do go crashing around, Mulder."

"Sorry." Mulder whispered, noticing for the first time how silently Skinner had been walking.

"There." Skinner waved him down and pointed. "See it? Eagle's nest."

"Where?" Mulder peered and saw a large bird circle and then land on a jutting out ridge not far away.

"Got a chick I think. See." Skinner put his arm around Mulder's shoulders and moved him forward slightly.

"Yes, I see! There is a chick!" Mulder breathed in, feeling absurdly thrilled by the spectacle. He exchanged a look of delight with Skinner, forgetting about the punishment for a moment. They stayed and watched for a while then Skinner turned back.

"Come on. Quietly." He put his finger over his lips. Mulder nodded, sighing.

"Do we have to go back?" he whispered. Skinner shook his head.

"Yes, Mulder. We have to go back," he replied, a rueful expression in his eyes.

"Couldn't we...I mean, isn't it over yet?" Mulder asked as they neared the glade, his whole body growing tense in anticipation of further pain.

"Don't tempt me, son." Skinner sighed, putting his arm gently around Mulder's shoulders, taking care not to hurt him. "I'd like to give up on it, spend the rest of the day doing something else, but that wouldn't be fair on you."

"On me?" Mulder queried incredulously. "Hey, you don't need to think about me!"

"Of course I do. I like you. And you need certain things from me, Fox. I wouldn't be doing my duty if I shirked this. I can't make you learn anything, I can't make you obey me, but I can damn well try my best to make you learn and to try and make you obey me. I don't want you to die because you didn't listen to me. I don't want you throwing your life away on a stupid mistake or a foolish crusade. I want better things for the people in my charge. And especially for you. You've been damaged, wounded at some point in the past."

"And you see me as what? Some sort of injured animal?" Mulder queried.

"If you like." Skinner shrugged. "A wounded Fox, needing to be taken care of. And part of that needing is for me to be tough on you. If I wasn't you wouldn't know where you were."

"I'm not sure I do anyway." Mulder said, with a wry shake of his head.

"Of course you do." Skinner told him seriously. "You know I'll whip your butt if you disobey me, and you know I'll stand by you all the way. I'm straight up and down, Fox. You cross me, you'll know it, but you're still your own person, free to make your own mistakes. I'm just trying to give you some sort of framework to operate in. A few guidelines to live by."

Mulder sighed. They had reached the glade again. Reluctantly he started undoing the buttons on his shirt.

"Fox." Skinner stood right in front of him, looked him in the eye. "This next stop will be as

bad as it ever gets I hope. I can't see how you can screw up much more than you did a few weeks ago. However..." He paused, shifted, kept Mulder transfixed by that dark stare, "This is going to get worse. A lot worse. You won't be walking out of this glade tonight, Fox. I'll be carrying you. You understand that?"

"No." Mulder could feel himself starting to whimper again. "Why do you need to make it that bad?" He whispered. "Please don't. Please."

"Fox, I have to." Skinner put careful, insistent hands on Mulder's shoulders. "I need to take you right down to basics. I hoped I wouldn't when I brought you out here. I hoped I wouldn't need to be this tough on you, but I know what I'm doing. And I know you. Do you trust me to take you on the next step of this?"

"I..." Mulder hopped from one foot to the other. "I don't want this, I'm scared," he murmured.

"Fear's okay." Skinner nodded, his fingertips brushing Mulder's shoulders gently. "Fear's fine. I'll be here, I'll be with you every step of the way. Now do you trust me?"

His dark eyes held Mulder's for a long while. Mulder wanted to scream and flounce back to the jeep, to be driven back to the cabin so that he could rest up and forget this pain, but he didn't want to duck out. Whatever Skinner thought he should endure, he supposed he could, if it meant that Skinner thought well of him, if it meant he didn't lose his support.

"Alright. Yes," he whispered. It was almost worth agreeing to see the look of approval in Skinner's eyes.

"Go on then. Get yourself ready. Put the cuffs back on." Skinner returned to the dying embers of the campfire, threw the remains of the coffee away, waited while Mulder finished undressing and prepared himself. Then he tied him back to the tree, pausing to inspect the damage he had inflicted so far, his blunt fingertips finding the welts and probing them carefully. Mulder shivered under his touch. "You'll be fine." Skinner told him finally. Then he changed suddenly, from solicitous and kind to cool, stern and demanding. He took a step back and picked up the whip again.

"I don't need you to count this time." Skinner told him softly. "I'm going to be going too fast for you to count anyway. This time you should just concentrate on breathing. This is going to be one fast ride so you're going to need to breathe as much as you scream. Alright?" Mulder nodded, taking a deep breath in preparation. Skinner hadn't been lying. The lashes came down one after the other, so furiously that he screamed and yelled his head off. He begged for it to stop, for Skinner to stop for just a second, but the onslaught was relentless. He was choking as he tried to breathe and scream and beg at the same time, but Skinner didn't stop. Finally, after god knew how long, Skinner approached him, pulled his head back by the hair, rested it against his shoulder.

"What's underneath it all, Fox?" He whispered. "What's right at the bottom of everything?"

"I don't know," Mulder shivered, his whole body shaking. "I can't think."

"I don't want you to think. That's the point. If you're thinking then I'm doing something wrong." Skinner said, going back again. The whip continued its endless, biting work and Mulder screamed, wishing he wasn't tied, wishing that he could avoid the lashes but each one hit its intended target. His flesh felt raw, livid, burning.

"Stop, please stop..." he panted over and over again. Another respite. Skinner's hands on his hair again.

"Tell me then." Skinner said. "What would make you disobey me, risk your life, your career?"

"Agent Scully..." Mulder rasped.

"Beyond that." Skinner demanded, his voice insistent.

"Fear." Mulder said.

"Fear of what?" Skinner asked.

"Don't know." Mulder shook his head. Skinner stepped back again, raised the whip.

"No, wait. I..." He hesitated then bit his lip. Skinner lashed him hard with the whip, the strokes even and fast. Dimly Mulder was aware that evening was drawing in, it was getting dark.

"Fear of losing them," he gasped out at last.

"Of losing who?" Skinner stood behind him again, holding up his body as he sagged in the cuffs, feeling them bite at his wrists.

"Sam..."

"Your sister?"

"Yeah, she went. Then Mom and Dad."

"They never left you." Skinner said, his hands large and reassuring on Mulder's waist, keeping him straight.

"They did. They weren't there any more. They slipped away from me. You never saw their eyes." Mulder whispered. "Then Scully. I didn't want to care about her, but I did. She made me...It was safer for her not to care about me. As soon as she did, she was taken. And you..." He whispered.

"Me?" Skinner asked.

"I'm a coward. When you see that you won't want to protect me."

"A coward?" Skinner sounded incredulous. "How do you work that out?"

"Inside. I'm scared all the time."

"Oh we all are." Skinner snorted. "That's just life, Fox. You do give yourself a hard time don't you? You think you'll lose me too?"

"I lose everyone." Mulder said. "Sooner or later. Safer not to care."

"Safer not to be alive?" Skinner asked, undoing Mulder's wrists from the tree. "Safer to run off and get yourself killed? To have a death-wish?" Released, Mulder half fell to the ground and was caught. He felt Skinner's hands under his arms, swinging one over his broad

shoulders. "It's not though." Skinner told him. "It's not safer, Mulder. It's painful. Like you feel right now. It hurts. I'll make sure of that so you remember it. Having a death-wish hurts more than being sensible." He bundled Mulder into the jeep, wrapped a blanket round him, glanced up at the sky. Sundown, just like he'd predicted. Damn but he hated being right so often.

Mulder didn't remember that journey. He vaguely remembered Skinner pulling him out of the jeep and carrying him into the cabin, lying him face down on the couch. He remembered Skinner running some water into a bowl and washing him down. He sure as hell remembered Skinner rubbing that stuff into the welts on his body making him cry out with a series of little wincing sobs. Then he started to feel a whole lot better. Skinner brought him some food, sat next to him, stroking his hair.

"You really are hard work, Mulder." Skinner told him.

"Going to give up on me?" He croaked.

"Oh that's not an option." Skinner told him seriously. "I never give up. On anybody. Not once they're mine and you are one of mine, Fox. Body and soul. Damn hard work though. My arm." He flexed his arm experimentally and winced.

"My heart bleeds for you," Mulder commented. Skinner treated him to another of those rare grins, stroked his hair again.

"Idiot!" He snorted. "I will tame you though, my injured fox. One of these days. Not enough to make you easy prey for everyone else, just enough that you'll eat from my hand."

"Maybe." Mulder sighed, closing his eyes.

"No maybe about it." Skinner informed him. "You have no idea how determined I can be."

"And you have no idea just how obstinate I can be." Mulder replied.

"After today?" Skinner raised an incredulous eyebrow. "Oh I think I do."

"A case of immovable objects meeting irresistible forces?" Mulder queried.

"We'll see." Skinner murmured, still keeping up that gentle caress on Mulder's hair. "Of course if that's true then you're in for a few more whippings yet," he said. Mulder sighed.

"I suppose," he muttered.

"And I won't be letting you get away with anything," Skinner told him seriously. "I don't think you want me to."

"Maybe not, no." Mulder said.

END OF PART 2

## Taming The Fox by Xanthe

### **Author's Notes:**

After the events of *Anasazi*, *The Blessing Way*, and *Paperclip*, Mulder goes to Skinner's apartment knowing that he's in big trouble.

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Skinner lay back on his couch with a sigh. It had been a long and grueling few weeks and he was pleased to rest up, listen to some soothing music, drink a nice mug of hot chocolate. He was a man of simple tastes but he rarely got to indulge himself like this. His stomach still ached from that punching Krycek had given him but the bruises on his face were fading. It was a shame about Alex Krycek, he thought to himself, a great shame. The man had potential, he was sure of it, if only someone could rescue him from the hole he had dug for himself. Skinner understood what made Krycek tick and he wanted to reach inside the other man's black soul and draw him into the light. As Krycek had stood in front of him, snarling and angry back at the hospital, Skinner had known why his former colleague was so upset. Krycek was jealous. Jealous of the place Fox Mulder occupied in Skinner's affections, jealous that Mulder had someone on his side, someone with integrity, someone who would help him in a crisis. Krycek had lost his way and he wanted what Mulder had - the calming, steadying influence of an older man, someone who would take the time and trouble to discipline him when he deserved it, praise him when he deserved it and above all look out for him. Skinner understood Krycek only too well.

And what about Mulder? Skinner rubbed his forehead, tiredly. He wished he could switch off from worrying about Fox Mulder but he couldn't. The boy was trouble. Always had been, always would be. But you knew that when you took him on, Walter, he chided himself. And now you've made him one of your own, you can't abandon him. He needs you. He had been hard pressed to support his protégé recently though - just a few short weeks ago he had nearly washed his hands of him. Nearly - but not quite. In truth he wasn't sure there was anything Mulder could do that would make him really wash his hands of him. The boy was just too intriguing, too promising, for that.

Skinner considered the problem again as he sipped his drink. Mulder needed him now more than ever. Yet how to approach this latest fiasco? The consequences of Mulder's behavior towards him? He loved the young agent like a son, a comrade in arms and you didn't abandon your friends, even when their behavior disturbed or upset you. Skinner closed his eyes. He needed to think this one through.

Skinner was rudely awakened by an impatient knocking on his door a couple of hours later. He got up, bleary-eyed, glancing at his watch. Half past one in the morning? Who was calling on him at this hour? He wasn't at all surprised to open his door to Fox Mulder, or to find himself pushed out of the way as Mulder charged into his apartment.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Mulder demanded angrily before Skinner had a chance to speak.

"Doing what, son?" He asked gently, watching as Mulder paced around the room, his lean body suffused with tension.

"Making me wait like this! Do you think I don't know the sort of trouble I'm in?" Mulder queried. "Do you think I've forgotten about our agreement?"

"No. I don't think that." Skinner stood silently, watching the younger man.

"Then why? It's been days since we got back. Days. And not a word from you. I thought after you agreed to come and meet us at Charlotte's Diner that you'd decided to help me. I thought that you were still on my side!"

"And now you're not sure?" Skinner queried, picking up his empty cup from beside the couch and taking it into the kitchen.

"No. I'm not sure. Of course I'm not sure!" Mulder shouted.

"Don't raise your voice to me." Skinner told him in a warning tone. "I don't appreciate being yelled at in my own home."

Mulder swallowed and got a visible grip on his temper, his body shaking with the effort of it.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. Skinner rinsed his cup under the tap and shook the water out. Mulder flinched at the movement, as if he feared a blow.

"Relax." Skinner told him. "You're all wound up like a tightly coiled spring. Now let's go back to the beginning shall we?"

"All right." Mulder hopped from one foot to the other. "I just want you to know that I don't want to be punished. I really don't want to be punished."

"I know that." Skinner nodded thoughtfully.

"But I'd rather that than..." Mulder broke off awkwardly and resumed his pacing.

"Than?" Skinner prompted.

"Than to feel you'd cut me loose. That you don't care any more." Mulder shivered, glancing at his boss with helpless eyes.

"Mulder I traveled a long way to rescue you, endured a beating on your behalf, put my job and my life on the line. Are those the actions of someone who doesn't care?" Skinner asked him softly. Mulder's face was twisted with misery.

"I... I don't know," he muttered.

"Why? What's at the heart of all this?" Skinner queried.

Mulder hesitated. He had felt driven to come here, driven by his own fear. This time he had gone too far - he knew that. He was sure that Skinner had decided to have nothing more to do with him after...after...He didn't even like to mention it, scared in case it would bring back Skinner's anger, remind Skinner of what he had said, of the way he had said it. Mulder didn't want to be whipped, but he would rather endure that than feel that Skinner had given up on him and Skinner's silence for the past few days had seriously unnerved him. He had been both awaiting and fearing his punishment and when it didn't materialize he had started to worry about why not.

"You...I..." He stood quite still, feeling suddenly weak and wretched.

"Yes?" Skinner asked.

Damn Skinner! He wasn't going to make this easy.

"I punched you." Mulder felt himself flushing at the memory.

"Yes. I remember." Skinner rubbed the side of his face where the bruise had been.

"And you said...that we were done. You meant our agreement was over, right? I knew that was what you meant. That you weren't here for me any more. I'd gone too far, crossed over the line."

"So why are you here?" Skinner asked, sitting himself down at his kitchen table, staring quietly and calmly at his uninvited guest.

"Because I don't want it to be true! Please, sir, give me another chance. I want another chance!" Mulder exclaimed in despair.

"And do you always get what you want?" Skinner queried with a raised eyebrow.

"No! Hardly ever in fact!" Mulder told him.

Skinner sighed.

"Well I was angry with you," he told Mulder. "Very angry indeed until I realized there were mitigating circumstances."

"That's it?" Mulder looked as if he would topple over with relief. "You're not blaming me? You've forgiven me? There'll be no punishment?"

"I didn't say that." Skinner told the other man sharply. "To be honest, although there were mitigating circumstances I still don't think they were adequate to excuse you for taking a swing at me the way you did. And I was very angry - I said what I did in the heat of the moment. It's very rare for me to give up on someone once I've taken them on and to be honest, you're special to me, son. I care what happens to you. We thought you were dead...you have no idea how distressing that was for me." Mulder stared at his boss, a bemused expression on his face.

"You cared?" He whispered. "You cared that I was dead?"

"Of course. I may be hard on you, Fox, but I certainly care. That's why I've been as tough with you as I have been in fact. However, like I said, the fact that you were drugged at the time does not excuse your behavior towards me. And I didn't like being on the receiving end of your gun either. I thought we had some trust going here, Fox."

"We did. We do. I just...I find trust hard." Mulder admitted. "Especially..."

"Especially when you're being asked to trust someone with authority over you?" Skinner queried shaking his head. "Damn - I'm sorry that your father is dead because I wish I could get my hands on him for what he did to you. He did a good job of screwing you up, son."

"We just didn't get on. It probably wasn't all his fault." Mulder sighed. "I wish we could have been closer - I wanted to be closer but...we just wound each other up."

"I can see how you would have been an exasperating child to rear." Skinner gave one of his rare smiles. "But still. I think he made a lot of mistakes with you. Mistakes that I keep having to rectify. He's given me a lot of hard work."

"What happens now?" Mulder asked fearfully, expecting the worse. Skinner got up and Mulder felt all the muscles in his body tense. It had been hard for him to come here like this. He hated being punished but he hated being abandoned more. "You're going to whip me, aren't you?" Mulder wished his voice didn't sound so pathetic. "That's OK. I can take it."

"I hope you can because I have something very particular in mind." Skinner told him, standing in front of him, his dark eyes stern.

"I thought you would. I thought it would be worse than last time even. I thought it would have to be. I mean, this wasn't just disobeying orders, this was taking a swing at you. I know it'll be the worst ever. I can get through that. I can." Mulder wasn't sure who he was trying to convince, Skinner or himself.

"It will be worse." Skinner told him. "Although not in the way you might expect, Fox."

"What do you mean?" Mulder asked anxiously.

"I mean that I won't hurt you as badly as I did last time - that was a special circumstance. I needed to break you down, find out what made you tick, reach inside you and I couldn't do that while you were still justifying yourself and hiding the truth within. This is different. I understand you better now and, like I said, I'm prepared to make allowances because of the circumstances. Not enough to let you off completely, but a little. However, we almost lost you and I'm glad to have you back. I don't want to beat the crap out of you and just send you on your way. That's not what I'm about. You must know that by now." Skinner sighed and shook his head. How much would it take to get through to this young man?

"So what then? Why do you say it will be worse and then say it won't hurt as much?" Mulder asked, confused. Skinner gave Mulder a long, hard stare.

"Because I'm going to give you something your dad never did," he replied. "I'm certainly going to discipline you but it'll be punishment without reproach. Enough to make you know you've done wrong, delivered in a way to make you realize that you're loved."

"I don't understand." Mulder swallowed convulsively.

"I think you'll find this harder." Skinner told him, his eyes still boring into Mulder's. "Because it's not just pain. Pain you can deal with - punishment delivered with affection, designed to make you understand how much your behavior upsets the people who care about you - that'll be harder for you. That means you accepting more of a share in the way you treat people. People like me and Agent Scully."

Mulder wanted to run away. He could already feel the tears pricking at his eyes. He didn't want to feel that he was understood. He didn't want to trust.

"Ever the suspicious fox?" Skinner queried with a harsh chuckle. "Scared of being hunted down? Torn apart?"

"I told you that you wouldn't tame me." Mulder replied, shaking his head. "And you won't."

"We'll see." Skinner said. "Now do you want to leave or do you want to stay and accept what I have in mind for you?"

"I'll stay." Mulder said evenly. "After last time there is nothing you can do to me that would be any worse."

"All right then." Skinner shrugged. "Now get your pants off."

"Just my pants?" Mulder queried. This was different. Usually Skinner had insisted on him being butt naked. He would have liked to imagine this was because his boss was a perverted madman but the truth was something different. He never got the impression that any of this turned Skinner on in any way. On the contrary. Sometimes he felt that it was a burden to the other man, an irritation and a source of sadness to him that he had to resort to such desperate and drastic measures.

"That's what I said." Skinner told him sharply. "Hurry up, Fox. You know I hate to be kept waiting." He went and sat down on the couch and Mulder did as he was told as quickly as possible, feeling as stupid as usual as he stood there in his boxer shorts. "Now come here." Skinner said tersely.

"What are you..." Mulder began and then stopped as Skinner glared at him.

"Just do it, Fox." Skinner sighed.

Mulder edged towards the couch, feeling sick inside his stomach. Surely this couldn't be worse than the trip to the glade? Than being strung up and whipped? Skinner didn't even seem to have any implements on him - not a paddle or belt or ruler or whip or anything in sight.

"Right. Over my knee." Skinner told him as he reached the couch.

"What?" Mulder blinked.

"You heard me!" Skinner stated implacably.

"No way! Like a kid?" Mulder queried. Being tied up or bent over a table wasn't so bad - being made to go over his boss's knee like he was 10 years old, well that was worse than

humiliating.

"I thought we had an agreement." Skinner said, getting up. "It seems I was wrong."  
"No, wait!" Mulder licked his lips, thinking. "All right. I'll do it. But I don't like it, all right?"

"Why? Because it makes you feel like a kid again? Well you behave like a kid, Fox. Or because it seems too intimate? Well, yes, it is a different dynamic, I'll give you that. Or maybe - maybe it's because that's how your dad used to punish you when you were a kid?"

"Maybe." Mulder could feel himself flushing bright red.

"I'm not him. But you've given me a similar authority over you." Skinner informed him.

"Now what's it to be?"

"Can't you just have me bend over the couch or something?" Mulder asked desperately.

"Who is in charge here? You or me?" Skinner demanded.

"You." Mulder sighed. "All right. I just don't like it, that's all."

"No, son. You're not supposed to. That's the point." Skinner sighed, sitting down again.

"Now, are you ready?"

Mulder swallowed and nodded, tip-toeing forward and standing pathetically beside his boss, struggling with what he was being asked to do. Finally he knelt down on the floor and levered himself over his boss's muscular thighs. He felt Skinner's hands on his hips, pulling him into a more comfortable position.

"Brace your right arm against my knee." Skinner told him. "That'll keep you steady. I'll take your left one." He pinned Mulder's left arm back along Mulder's torso. "That'll keep you from being tempted to flail around too much or push yourself off. Now." Skinner smoothly pushed Mulder's boxers down his thighs, leaving them somewhere around Mulder's knees. "This may only be my hand, son, but it's a big hand and it's hard. I promise you that you'll feel it. Try and keep steady." He raised his hand and then Mulder heard a sound like a clap and a sharp pain resonated in his backside. He squirmed, tears of humiliation smarting in his eyes.

Skinner's hand worked fast and furiously, covering every spare inch of Mulder's buttocks with a series of stinging blows. After a while Mulder didn't care if nothing more damaging than a hand was being used. A hand could still hurt like hell! Especially when applied over and over again, in an endless torrent of blows to a defenseless butt. He was dimly aware that Skinner was talking to him but he wasn't sure what was being said. His whole body was tensed as those slaps descended on him. There was a brief pause and he wondered if it was over - then he realized that Skinner was asking him something. He struggled to listen.

"I want you to stop tensing." Skinner was saying. "Just loosen up. Tensing hurts more and you have a long way to go yet. Let go of it, Fox, stop fighting it. It's going to happen anyway, you're just making it worse for yourself."

Mulder nodded and tried to loosen up as directed. Skinner waited, his big hand caressing Mulder's back gently until Mulder's muscles gradually relaxed. Then the blows began again -

slowly at first, then harder and harder. Mulder could feel himself panting and sobbing, sagging against Skinner's broad thighs, his right hand scrabbling for purchase, sliding on and off of Skinner's knee as he tried to stay in position.

"Fox." Skinner stopped again. "Try and keep still. You can't escape them. They're going to just keep on coming so accept them."

Easier said than done, Mulder thought to himself, hearing a feeble wail start up in the back of his throat. He did try though, and he was surprised to find he succeeded. Skinner was right - every slap was reaching its destination, it didn't make any difference how much Mulder tried to slip and slide to avoid it. He stopped trying to evade the stinging smacks and accepted them, just as Skinner had advised.

"It hurts but it's for your own good." Skinner told him, his hefty hand still walloping down the spanks.

"One day you'll thank me for this...this hurts me more than it hurts you...any more old clichés?" Mulder snapped between yelps. "I'm not in the mood for clichés."

"No it looks like you're in the mood for insolence." Skinner thwacked him harder and Mulder let out a cry of pure pain, wondering how much more he could endure. "And I intend to make you thank me for this very soon. And as for hurting me more than it hurts you - I sure as hell doubt it if the color of your ass right now is anything to go by. I was just about ready to stop, but seeing as how you're so smart-mouthed, let's see if we can't teach you a lesson about what is and is not a good thing to say when you're having your hide tanned."

His hand continued with its work until Mulder felt as if he didn't have the breath to keep himself alive, let alone to make wisecracks with. He felt exhausted, humiliated and totally chastened by the whole experience. Finally it finished. Mulder felt his boxers being replaced over his totally sore backside and then Skinner's hand was on his back again, soothing him. It ended up in his hair, wiping the sweaty locks away from his eyes. Mulder lay there for several minutes just panting.

"You feel able to get up?" Skinner asked him at last.

"I'll try." Mulder tried to lever himself to his knees but he had been in the same position for too long and his whole body protested. Skinner got hold of him and aided him and finally Mulder managed to perch himself against the couch. He couldn't meet Skinner's eyes. He felt too tired and curiously daunted by what he had experienced. "You were right," he muttered. "That was worse than the glade."

"More personal." Skinner told him. "More of a child's punishment. Back in the glade you could convince yourself this was some sort of military style discipline. An endurance test. Here today, though, this was just a straightforward spanking, son. Nothing more or less. Dented your pride a little I guess." He reached forward and pulled Mulder's chin up, looked into the other man's eyes. "Well?" He asked.

"Well what?" Mulder looked down, still unable to meet that dark gaze.

"Look at me." Skinner's fingers dug into his chin, forcing his head up until he met his boss's eyes. "I'm waiting, Fox." Skinner told him.

"For what?" Mulder muttered.

"An apology." Skinner sighed. "And a thank you."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Mulder flushed. "For hitting you and the gun thing."

"And for nearly getting yourself killed?" Skinner asked. Mulder's eyes dropped again and again Skinner's fingers dug into his chin.

"Yeah. I suppose. For nearly getting myself killed." Mulder agreed reluctantly.

"That's good. That's an important part of it." Skinner told him. "I don't want you getting yourself killed, son. Now - what else do you have to say to me?"

"Thank you." Mulder muttered sulkily, feeling like he was regressing in age the more this punishment went on. He had started off as a grown man of 34, been rapidly reduced to the age of 10 and was now hovering somewhere about 6. Soon Skinner would have a sulking toddler on his hands.

"For what?" Skinner asked.

"For..." Mulder tried to pull his head away from Skinner's hand and failed. "For...I don't know!" He snapped. "For being such a mean son of a bitch, for making me feel like a kid, for hurting me so damn bad I'm not going to be able to sit down for days, you bastard?"

His feet didn't touch the ground. One minute he was kneeling on the floor and the next he was upside down over Skinner's knees again, his boxers once more around his knees and Skinner's hand belting down on his upturned ass with an angry speed and efficiency that he was already too well acquainted with. He shrieked, kicked and struggled but Skinner didn't let up until Mulder was once again a gasping, tear-stained wreck. Then he was flipped back onto his knees. He cautiously replaced his boxers again, glancing up at his boss from under tear-fringed eyelashes.

"Sorry," he murmured. Skinner nodded at him tersely, his arms folded as he waited for more. "And thank you for taking the time and trouble to sort me out when I'm such a jerk." Mulder hung his head, feeling distinctly subdued.

"Have you learnt your lesson?" Skinner asked him.

"Yes." Mulder said. He could feel the sobs wracking his body and then he broke down completely, crying like a baby and only partly because of the pain and humiliation. "I should go home," he muttered. "I want to go home..." He tried to get up, howled in pain, stumbled to his feet and found his way blocked by Skinner.

"Not yet. Not like this." Skinner told him.

"Just let me go. Dad used to let me go, I want to go!" Mulder yelled, one step away from stamping his feet in frustration. He felt Skinner's big arms go round his shoulders, holding him tight and comforting him. "Let me go," he muttered feebly into a large expanse of chest.

"No. I do things differently." Skinner said. "Now you'll stay because you're upset and you hurt." Mulder stood there for a while, his head buried in Skinner's shoulder, sobbing quietly. Then Skinner led him back to the couch and helped him to lie down on it. "Your punishment's over now." Skinner informed him. "So just take a few minutes to get yourself back together again, son. Then we'll talk."

"Talk? About what?" Mulder buried his head in a cushion, wishing he were dead.

"About you. About how you're going to be the best agent an assistant director could wish for, about how you are never going to risk your life doing something stupid again, never punch me again, never hold a gun on me again, never again disobey a direct order." Mulder couldn't see his boss but he just knew that the other man was grinning.

"About how my boss is living in a fantasy world?" He suggested.

"Yeah. Ain't that the truth!" Skinner ruffled Mulder's hair with his hand. "So, Mulder, my injured fox. Eating out of my hand yet?"

"I came here didn't I?" Mulder's voice was muffled by the cushion. "I let you do that to me. I guess you have tamed me after all."

"Maybe. Not quite, but maybe." Skinner's dry chuckle was delighted. "But I seriously suspect that you might prove to be untamable, son. And I think we have a long way to go yet."

"You know what I was saying about preferring the glade to this?" Mulder took his head out of the cushion and looked up. "You knew I'd feel this way about it. Don't you get sick of being right?"

"No. I only get sick of you disobeying me and harming yourself." Skinner told him. "And as for the glade - well my hand's not quite as efficient as a whip. You'll be sitting down again quicker than you did last time although not any time soon! But that's not what bugs you is it? It's how it made you feel."

"Yeah." Mulder gulped down another wave of misery. "But even that's not as bad as how I felt when I thought you'd given up on me. Promise me you won't ever give up on me, sir."

"Oh, I think that's pretty unlikely." Skinner said seriously.

Mulder sat up slowly and nudged his way cautiously along the couch until he was next to his boss. Then he curled his long body up into a position that was as painless as he could manage and allowed his head to duck against his boss's shoulder, until his face was buried in the tear-stained fabric of Skinner's shirt. Skinner sighed and put his arm around the other man. Eating out of your hand, that's what you wanted, Walter, he thought to himself. And this was as close to it as he was going to come. A few moments with the injured fox, a few

brief moments before the feral creature was off out again, running wild, getting into trouble. They were moments to be savored none the less. He stroked Mulder's hair gently, wishing he could keep the other man safe like this all the time - knowing that he couldn't...

### END OF PART 3

#### **Chapter End Notes:**

If you've enjoyed this surreal spankfest, please leave a review.

Also if you're worried about the effect all this disciplining might be having on Skinner, why not check out **Identity Crisis**.

#### Paper Hearts by Xanthe

#### **Author's Notes:**

If ever an episode required a discipline story written about it, it's *Paper Hearts*. So, this is my take on it. Skinner is well and truly on the warpath.

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It was an agonizing plane journey. Mulder found himself sandwiched between a not-speaking-to-you Scully and a my-arms-are-aching-to-whip-you Skinner. He tried not to let any part of his body touch either Scully's frosty shoulder or Skinner's huge and tensely muscled arm, but it wasn't easy, not least because Skinner took up more than his fair share of space and Mulder didn't like to ask him to lean the other way a bit. Skinner wasn't talking to Scully and she wasn't talking to Mulder and as Mulder didn't dare talk to either of them, he guessed that they were in for a long, slow nightmare of a journey.

Nothing can be worse than this, Mulder thought miserably to himself, although he knew that something could, and he knew he'd find out exactly what that something was just as soon as Skinner got him back on solid ground, and in some private place somewhere. However he wasn't just unhappy because of the punishment he knew he was only hours away from receiving, he was also unhappy because of the distress he had caused to a blameless little girl. It was through his actions that the child had been abducted by Roche and that was the last thing he had ever intended to happen. He felt very bad about it. And then there was Scully. Skinner had placed him in her charge and he had slipped away from her, knowing that his actions would get her into trouble with their boss. He felt bad about that too. By the look of it, Skinner had already had a few terse words with Scully on the matter. Mulder hoped that Skinner didn't use the same methods of discipline on Scully as he did on himself. He was sure that wasn't the case - Scully could walk for a start and he had a feeling that he wouldn't be able to in a couple of hours time. No, he assumed that Skinner had

just chewed Scully out big time. And Scully was smarting and blamed him for it. Which was only fair seeing as it was all his fault. He had really screwed up on this one and he supposed he deserved to be punished but that didn't stop him dreading what would be coming his way soon.

"Drink, sir?" The flight attendant smiled at Skinner, then at Mulder and finally at Scully. Neither of them returned the smile. Mulder was dying for a drink and decided to risk it. Anyway, he needed one. He needed one badly.

"Yeah. I'll have a..." He surveyed the drinks cart. "Whatever's strongest," he told the woman.

"He'll have a water." Skinner said in a low, growly tone. "I wouldn't want to have to carry you off this plane drunk, Mulder," he muttered. "I want you standing when I get you to my office." Mulder winced. Being drunk was certainly an option he preferred right now. He accepted the water and opened the bottle just as the plane hit some turbulence. The water splashed against Scully's hair and she wiped it off furiously, her eyes glowing angrily. Mulder put the top back on the bottle quickly and decided that drinking of any sort was just not an option. Not if he wanted to actually stay alive for the rest of this journey. Of course once the journey was over he was a dead man anyway, so he might as well throw the entire contents of the bottle all over Skinner and Scully right now and have done with it. It couldn't possibly make any difference to his fate. Mulder sighed and fiddled with his tie, trying to cross his long legs in the small space and failing.

"If I were you..." Skinner murmured in a low, threatening voice. "I'd stop fidgeting and try and keep as quiet as possible for the next hour or so."

"Yes, sir," he whispered. He glanced at Scully, sure that she had overheard this exchange and hoping for some sympathy. He only got a cold blue stare of venom from her, one that told him that she was glad he was in trouble and that he deserved it.

Mulder sat back and concentrated on keeping every limb, muscle and nerve ending completely still. He tried not to think about his punishment but he couldn't help it. Every time Skinner had punished him in the past, he had done so with a certain degree of...well...kindness, Mulder supposed. Certainly not with a huge amount of anger, although he had definitely been cross on occasion. Today was different though. Today, Skinner was furious. Mulder recalled the sting of Skinner's belt during his first beating. Shit, that had hurt. And the whip he'd used in the glade had felt like fire. Mulder felt his body trembling slightly as he imagined what Skinner would do to him this time. He wondered if it was too late to end their agreement. Skinner had said that he could, any time he wanted. What would the consequences of that be? He had taken a convicted murderer of small girls on a plane journey, on a mission that was personal to him. He had done so without permission from his boss, and by deceiving and ditching his partner. He had allowed the murderer to overpower him, get loose, kidnap and hold hostage a blameless little girl. What sort of disciplinary measures would a "normal" assistant director impose on him, he wondered? Suspension at the very least, probable reassignment, disciplinary black marks on his file - almost certainly. Skinner had never resorted to any of these methods and Mulder's file had been almost black mark-free for the past couple of years, as Skinner had carefully hidden

the truth about the methods of investigation that his most wayward agent employed.

So - accept Skinner's methods of discipline, which in this case he knew would be pretty severe, or accept more traditional FBI disciplinary measures. Mulder weighed it up fairly seriously. He had never before even considered ending the agreement he had with his boss. He liked the freedom it gave him, and he endured the punishments as the price for that freedom. This time he feared it more than any other time though. This time he truly wasn't sure he could go through the ordeal. At least before...at least Skinner had seemed to be on his side in a curious sort of way. He had taken Mulder to the limits of his endurance but he had been supportive, calming, and "there" for him. This time, Mulder sensed that Skinner wouldn't be either as patient or as caring as he had before. This time Skinner meant business.

"Mulder." Skinner said warningly, placing one finger on Mulder's leg. Mulder realized that he had been bouncing his knee up and down in a nervous gesture. He stopped.

"Sorry," he muttered, his eyes meeting Skinner's for a brief moment, hoping to find some clue in them. Skinner's expression was grim, his eyes dark and unreadable. Mulder wished it were over, that they weren't in a crowded plane and that Skinner would just bend him over the nearest seat and whip him senseless. It was the waiting that he couldn't bear. Got to get a grip, he told himself. Get a grip, get a grip. He closed his eyes, tried to breathe deeply. It was no use. He opened his eyes again, and saw that Scully appeared to have fallen asleep. Cautiously, he leaned towards Skinner.

"Um, sir?" he whispered.

"Yes." Skinner snapped tersely.

"About our agreement..." Mulder licked his lips and glanced at Scully again but she didn't stir.

"Yes." Skinner's whole body seemed to tense in the seat next to Mulder's. He gave Mulder a warning look and his eyes moved briefly around the plane as if to check who might be listening.

"I might want to think about re-considering it." Mulder said.

"Your prerogative, Mulder." Skinner said with a slight shrug, his dark eyes cold and angry. "But remember that your butt's on the line one way or the other, if you get my meaning. You don't walk out of this without some sort of penalty."

"No, sir. I understand that. As a matter of interest..." Mulder paused, unable to believe he was doing this. "As a matter of interest, sir, if I did end our agreement, what um, would the nature of the, um "penalty" be then?"

Skinner snorted.

"I don't think so, Mulder," he said grimly. "Why don't you just make your mind up without all the facts? Like you did this time, and on a couple of other occasions I can think of."

"Yes, sir." Mulder felt himself flush and he clenched his fists tightly.

"Let me know what you've decided by the time the plane lands," Skinner said. "Because I want to know how I'm going to be dealing with you when we get back to the office. I'd like to give it some thought before then."

"Yes, sir." Mulder nodded, chewing on his lip. His whole body squirmed at the thought of Skinner sitting beside him, calmly considering how best to whip his ass. It scared him.

He didn't consider himself to be a coward. He had been in hundreds of difficult, dangerous and painful situations in his time. Only this time it was worse. The anticipation was half the nightmare. Mulder hated being whipped, although he supposed he hated it less than he hated being called up before a board of FBI stuffed shirts and made to account for himself. It was over quicker for a start and had far less impact on his career. With another twitch of his knee, Mulder realized that he had made his decision.

"Sir?" Mulder glanced at Scully again, but she was still asleep.

"Mulder." Skinner's tone contained a deep sigh.

"I don't want to end our agreement, sir," he murmured.

"I didn't think for a moment that you would." Skinner replied, shooting him a dark glance. Damn him! How did he always know Mulder so much better than Mulder knew himself?

"I was just..." He paused. Skinner nodded.

"Scared. I know." Skinner shrugged. "You should be," he commented. "You're in for a rough ride, Agent Mulder."

Mulder swallowed and tried to open the water bottle. He needed this right now. His fingers trembled so much that he couldn't twist the lid off the bottle. With another sigh, Skinner took the bottle out of his hands and opened it for him, returning it to him so that he could drink. Mulder accepted it gratefully, and raised it shakily to his lips.

"Once..." Skinner whispered, leaning forward in his seat, "in Vietnam, I disobeyed an order to return to base. One of my buddies was still in the jungle and I was convinced he was still alive. I took off after him, got myself lost. My CO found me, and got me safely back to camp. It was a long journey. Four hours. He didn't talk to me the whole way, and I knew what he was going to do to me once he got us both home. It was a hairy ride - we were nearly killed a couple of times on the way back and of course when we did get back, the buddy I had gone looking for was already there - alive and kicking. I'd made a damned nuisance of myself for nothing."

Mulder listened to this story in surprise, allowing the narrative to distract him from his own predicament.

"What happened to you, sir?" He asked, curious. "What did your CO do to you?"

"Marshall was an interesting guy - he was the best soldier I ever met." Skinner paused, ran a hand over his bald head. "And he had one hell of a reputation. Everybody wanted to be in his unit - he kept his personnel alive. He looked out for each and every one of us, but we sure as hell knew it when we'd screwed up." Skinner shook his head wryly, and settled back in his seat again. There was silence for a moment.

"Sir? You still haven't answered my question." Mulder said.

"Yes I have." Skinner snapped.

Mulder distracted himself for a while by imagining a skinny 18 year old Skinner being tied to a tree and whipped by a huge, fearsome marine. It didn't help. He was still scared shitless by the prospect of his own impending doom.

"God knows what Marshall would have made of you." Skinner commented a few minutes later. "He was much tougher on his personnel than I am."

"Tougher than you?" Mulder queried incredulously. Was that possible?

"Much tougher." Skinner repeated. "He knew the way I was feeling, but he didn't say a word to me on that march through the jungle. I've been kinder to you."

Mulder wondered if he was supposed to say "thank you" or something. He decided against it.

The plane finally came into land, and Skinner got up and blocked the aisle with his massive frame, shooting a frown at both Mulder and the newly awakened Scully. Scully scowled at Mulder in turn and Mulder stared at his tie. At least he was fairly sure that Skinner would stop being angry with him when he'd punished him thoroughly. He wasn't so sure about Scully. She didn't know what Skinner was about to do to him. That was a good thing. That would make it even worse.

"Get your bags. I'll get us a taxi." Skinner told them both, setting off down the aisle as if he couldn't bear to be in their company for another second.

"Well, Mulder, I hope you're satisfied." Scully hissed. "Skinner really chewed me out over this."

"It's nothing compared to what he's going to do to me, believe me." Mulder muttered, giving her a beseeching look. She ignored it.

"I don't care what he does to you. You deserve it," she told him coldly.

"You have no idea, Scully." He found himself shivering again. Scully shook her head and stared at him.

"You really are scared of Skinner aren't you, Mulder?" She sounded surprised.

"Right now? Petrified." Mulder couldn't even manage a wry smile.

"You have nobody to blame but yourself. I'd be scared if I was in your shoes. He is REALLY

angry." Scully pulled her bag down and left Mulder standing in the aisle, contemplating his fate.

They pulled up at the Hoover building in silence, walked along the corridors in silence. At the elevator Skinner turned to Scully.

"I'll see you in my office tomorrow morning at 9 am, Agent Scully," he told her briskly.

"Yes, sir..." Scully shot a look at Mulder who had gone quite pale. "What about Agent Mulder, sir?" She asked, concerned about her partner despite herself.

"Agent Mulder will be coming with me." Skinner told her. "You won't see him for the rest of the day," he said firmly. "So you might like to catch up on some paperwork."

"Yes, sir." Scully felt the smallest twinge of pity for Mulder. She watched as Skinner placed his hand in the small of Mulder's back and shoved him into the elevator. Mulder was in big trouble.

Mulder wasn't sure if his legs would carry him along the corridor to Skinner's office. Was Skinner going to punish him here - in his own office? Wouldn't it be too noisy? Or was his boss going to gag him or something? Mulder felt himself hyperventilating at the very thought. Skinner put his hand on Mulder's shoulder and practically frog-marched him to his door. He thrust Mulder bodily into his office and closed the door quietly behind him. Then he went over to a cupboard and pulled out a bag. He threw it to Mulder.

"What's this?" Mulder caught it and peered inside.

"A change of clothing." Skinner told him. "I'll see you in the gym in 5 minutes. Go, Mulder. Now."

Mulder opened his mouth to ask more questions then closed it again as he caught Skinner's dark malevolent expression. He fled.

Skinner worked him solidly for 3 hours. Mulder did so many sit-ups he thought his ribs would break. The muscles in his abdomen ached, and sweat poured off him. The gym was quiet - the few people who had been there when they arrived soon sloped off as it became clear that Mulder was not so much doing a work-out as being put through the grinder by his grim-faced supervisor. An air of menace emanated from Skinner, and Mulder's fear was only slightly relieved by the exercise endorphins flooding his body. Finally he flopped to the floor, totally exhausted.

"Please..." He panted.

"Had enough?" Skinner loomed over him.

"I'm sorry. What do you want me to say? I screwed up!" Mulder sobbed. "Big time. I know that. I know I deserve to be punished."

"Yes, you do. Get undressed." Skinner told him tersely. Then he went and checked the gym

door, locking it with a key that he seemed to have brought with him. He lowered the blind over the door as Mulder watched with an increasing sense of dread. Mulder undressed slowly, trembling again. He had never seen Skinner this grim faced and angry. He had spoken of being angry before, but he had never been so obviously, darkly furious. Skinner turned back to him and prowled menacingly towards him. Mulder wasn't sure if his knees were going to hold up. He removed the last item of his clothing as quickly as he could, and then hopped from foot to foot as Skinner approached him.

"Over here." Skinner put a hand on the back of Mulder's neck and propelled him towards the vaulting horse in the center of the gym. Mulder started to whimper. "Stop that." Skinner told him coldly. "I haven't even started yet." He pushed Mulder face down over the horse. Mulder felt his feet leave the ground, and clung onto the side of the apparatus in alarm. He could smell the sweaty stench of it and feel the rub of the cool, leathery surface against his bare chest.

"Do I need to tell you how angry I am?" Skinner asked. Mulder shook his head. "I will anyway." Skinner snarled. "I'm furious. First you deceive Scully, then you run off with a convicted killer, then, unforgivably, unleash him on an unsuspecting public. One little girl will be having nightmares about that experience for the rest of her days and I will be called to account for it, Agent Mulder. Not you, who I trusted, but me. I'll smooth it over for you, I'll take the rap for it, but you're damn well going to know what the price for that is. Now maybe you're wondering why I just had you work out for 3 hours - shall I tell you?" "Um...yes." Actually Mulder would have preferred it if Skinner had just got on with the punishment. He felt exposed, lying naked over the horse like this and his butt was already aching from the punishment he expected to receive. A lecture right now was the last thing he wanted.

"Well I had you work out this long to give me time to cool down. If I'd laid my hands on you when we first arrived back then you wouldn't have been alive to walk out of this building, Mulder. I'm more in control now. Luckily for you. You're still going to feel this though. Anything else I've ever done to you will be like a walk in the park compared to this. You can scream all you like; it's late now - another reason for keeping you here so long. And we're a long way from passers-by. And apart from that, rumor of your recent exploit has spread like wildfire - there won't be anybody who'll begrudge me this if they did find out. Hell, I don't think anybody would lift a finger to stop me. This is more than deep shit, Mulder. This is buried up to your head in shit. And this is going to damn well hurt."

Mulder watched in terror as Skinner went over to a cupboard containing some equipment and opened it, getting out one of the thick, heavy belts people used to protect their backs when lifting weights. He tried to stifle a groan and failed. A normal belt hurt enough, but this was much heavier and wider.

"Ready?" Skinner asked. He wanted to shout and yell and say no, but instead he just swallowed again and thought of that little girl and nodded.

Skinner swung the belt down. It made a rasping sound as it connected with his bare thigh and he couldn't contain the scream that rose in his throat. Nothing Skinner had ever used

before had hurt so much. The whip had stung, but this burned a heavy line of pain deep into his flesh. Dimly he wondered how many of these he could take. Skinner didn't build up slowly - he swung straight in there, over and over again and soon Mulder's sweaty hands were grasping for purchase on the horse, sure that he would fall off. Skinner didn't confine himself to Mulder's butt either, but instead worked over a whole area of his body starting at his shoulders and going right down to the back of his knees. Mulder's already stressed muscles tensed with the agony of not knowing where the next lick would land. The belt was so heavy-duty that each stroke blazed a fire of pure pain into his skin that took his breath away. Mulder buried his head in his arms and started to shake as he screamed.

There was a pause and Mulder looked up hopefully, his last scream dying in his throat but Skinner hadn't stopped - he was just wrapping the belt more tightly round his fist.

"Brace yourself," he muttered. "This is something that was done to me once - and I never forgot the lesson of it." He rapped the belt down on Mulder's backside and then raised it again and brought it down on the same spot, and then again. And again. Mulder screamed with pain.

"Please...somewhere else...please..." he whimpered but nothing deflected Skinner from his aim. He hit that spot over and over again, until Mulder felt sure that his skin was torn and bleeding from it. He started to wriggle, to lean away to avoid the blows, to make them land in a different spot. Skinner was a few strides away from him, and he wasn't holding him down, so Mulder was able to alter his position enough to make sure that the next blow didn't hit the mark that Skinner was aiming for. There was a terrible silence.

"You'll stay still," Skinner told him, "or you'll wish you had. Which is it to be?" Mulder cleared his throat.

"I'll try," he whispered.

"Good. Because I'm not nearly finished with you yet." Skinner thudded another blow on the sore spot and Mulder shrieked, his whole body flipping into the air slightly. Despite his promise he couldn't stay still. His body just wouldn't obey him and two strokes later he rolled away from the lash and took the blow lower down on his body. There was silence again, and then Mulder felt his hair being tugged. Skinner pulled him bodily off the horse and propelled him over to one of the padded work benches. He sat down, grabbed Mulder and pulled him over his knee, placing a hand on Mulder's back to keep him still.

"You won't be able to avoid them now." Skinner told him grimly. Mulder noticed that he'd left the belt behind and picked up a sneaker from Mulder's pile of abandoned clothing. This was heavier even than the belt, and it thwacked down with a lightning intensity on his bare flesh, connecting with that painful area that Skinner had already created on his abused backside. Mulder felt the tears run down his cheeks and onto his boss's thickly muscled thighs. He held on for dear life as the shoe bit streaks of painful fire into his flesh, thudding down over and over again on one small area of his buttocks until he thought the pain would make him pass out. He didn't plead though, or beg for the punishment to stop. He just thought of that little girl and what she had endured because of him. He could take any punishment that Skinner thought he deserved. It was only right.

Finally, his knees gave way and his already over-worked muscles turned to jello. He lay limply across his boss like a rag doll, not even noticing when Skinner stopped. Skinner allowed him to just lie there, stunned, for a few moments, waiting until his breathing calmed down, then he helped Mulder to get up. Every nerve fiber in Mulder's body protested as Skinner walked him back to his pile of clothing and handed him each item, one by one until he was fully clothed. It took some while - Mulder's body wasn't obeying his brain's commands and he swayed a couple of times, leaning on Skinner's broad arms for support. Still Skinner didn't speak. Finally, when he was dressed, Skinner took hold of his shoulders, looked into his eyes, and said:

"Don't you ever make me this angry again. I don't like having to do this, Mulder."

"No." Mulder looked at his feet, still hearing his blood pound in his ears.

"Now come with me. This isn't over yet." Skinner put a hand on the back of Mulder's neck, pushed him over to the door, unlocked it and escorted Mulder back up to his office. Kimberly had gone home, and the corridors were deserted. Mulder was glad of that. He was sure his red, tear-stained, sweat-streaked face, spoke volumes about what had just happened to him and he was dimly aware that he smelt. Not over yet...what did Skinner mean? Mulder shuddered, dreading to think what Skinner had meant.

"You have some paperwork to do." Skinner told him, pointing at a chair opposite his desk. "A report on this whole sorry mess. You can write it here, now, and run each sentence by me so that I know you're on the right track. I'm the one who has to make this stick."

"You want me to sit down and write?" Mulder gasped incredulously.

"Yes. Now." Skinner sat down in his own chair and got out a pad of paper, handed Mulder a pen. "Quickly, Mulder." Gingerly, Mulder perched himself on the edge of the chair but even that hurt too much. He got up again.

"I could stand," he suggested.

"No. You'll sit." Skinner got up, crossed over to him, and sat him down firmly in the chair. Mulder yelped. "Now, write." Skinner said. "Before I get angry again." Mulder watched as Skinner opened his desk drawer and got out a big, heavy wooden ruler. "Just to help you keep your mind on your work." Skinner told him, without a trace of a smile, placing the ruler in plain sight on his desk. Mulder swallowed and bent his head over the pad, trying to ignore the hundred different messages of pain that his body was sending him.

Skinner kept him there for 4 hours writing that report. He insisted that Mulder read out every sentence, explain every comma and full stop, and only allowed Mulder to get up for a few minutes to use the washroom. Once in the privacy of the washroom, Mulder examined the damage to his butt. The place where Skinner had concentrated his attentions was a mass of thick, dark welts, each overlaying the other until the individual stroke was invisible amid the welter of red bruising. He undid his shirt and examined his back in the mirror, finding long streaks of angry mottled flesh. He was going to hurt for days - weeks. He dressed and returned to the other room, sensing that now was not a good time to keep his boss waiting. Finally, after several long hours, it was over.

"I'll run you home." Skinner told him.

"No...I can..." Mulder began.

"I'll run you home." Skinner repeated tersely. Mulder nodded.

When they got to his apartment, Mulder hesitated. They had driven in silence, and he was more than a little concerned about their future working relationship.

"Sir..." He began, his hand on the door handle.

"Yes, Mulder." Skinner nodded.

"Are you still angry with me?" Mulder felt stupid asking, but it bothered him.

"Yes." Skinner said.

"Oh." Mulder opened the door, then stopped. "Would you, um...come in for a drink or something?" He asked, not sure why, just that he needed to persuade Skinner not to be angry with him any more. Skinner sighed and stared at him.

"All right, Mulder." He agreed reluctantly, getting out of the car.

Mulder wished he hadn't offered. He didn't really want Skinner in his apartment, making small talk, he just wanted everything to be okay.

"Look, I know I screwed up." Mulder said, once the door shut behind them. "I just want to know that it's going to all right."

"You won't be suspended, Mulder. I'll take the rap for this." Skinner told him wearily. "I'll find some way of explaining it."

"Thanks, sir, but that wasn't what I meant." Mulder shrugged then wished he hadn't. He winced and clung onto the couch for a moment as a dizzy wave of pain passed through him.

"I know what you meant and I know exactly what it is that you don't want to ask me for right now." Skinner sat himself down on the couch with a sigh. "I'm disappointed in you, Mulder. I've worked through some of that anger but I'm still pretty mad. I expect I'll get over it. In time."

"Please, sir...wouldn't you...that is..." How did Skinner know what he didn't want to ask him for? Mulder remembered when Skinner had put him over his knee and spanked him like a kid, how afterwards he had been kind and comforting. He wanted, needed that comfort now but he wasn't sure he deserved it. "That little girl." Mulder felt his eyes filling up with tears and he wiped them away angrily.

"Will you think next time, Fox?" Skinner asked him. "Will you listen to me?"

"I will try." Mulder chewed on his lip. "I promise I'll try." He perched himself awkwardly on the floor next to Skinner's leg, wanting to be looked after. How did Skinner always make him feel like a beaten puppy in need of a kind master?

He felt Skinner's big hand in his hair and yelped as Skinner yanked his head back and looked into his eyes.

"Once, I spoke of taming you. I accept I probably never will." Skinner sighed. "That's my failure. I'm sorry for it, son, because I think you might stay alive longer if I succeed. However, I have at least managed to get you to trust me, I hope."

Mulder nodded, as best he could with the tight grip Skinner had of his hair.

"Don't let anybody else try and tame you, Fox." Skinner told him. "If you won't belong to me, then don't belong to anyone else. They might not be as understanding as I am. And they certainly won't give you what you need. Like this." Skinner pulled Mulder up bodily by the hair until he was next to him on the couch, then hauled Mulder's body into his lap and stroked the other man's hair gently. "I guess I'm too soft," he sighed. Mulder felt his muscles relax and gave himself up to the knowledge that Skinner had forgiven him and that his boss's anger was receding. After a long silence, a thought occurred to him.

"Sir...?" He asked.

"Hmm?" Skinner was lying back, exhausted, his eyes closed.

"What did happen to you back in Vietnam? With your CO?"

"Like I said, he was way tougher than I am." Skinner's fingers tightened in Mulder's hair for a moment, then relaxed and smoothed it out again. "He took me out of camp late that night and made my buddy, the one I'd gone looking for, hold me up while he leathered me with his belt until I couldn't stand. Then he carried me back, bandaged me up and made me work twice as hard for the next 2 weeks. I remembered that little lesson, believe me."

"You still see this guy?" Mulder asked. "Did he make it back?"

"Oh yeah. Marshall made it back. He was that sort of guy." Skinner snorted. "I see him occasionally. He's the same as ever. I still wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of him, but he kept me alive in Vietnam. I wouldn't have got back if it hadn't been for him. I'd obey him implicitly. I wish you'd do that for me. Then I could keep you safe, the way he kept me safe." "I just...get ideas in my head and I can't stop myself." Mulder admitted lamely.

"I know." Skinner sighed again. "I still think it's my fault for not getting the discipline right, but we'll have to learn to live with that. If you die, I'll be furious," he said.

"You can't whip my ass if I'm dead." Mulder told him with a grin.

"No. Which is why I guess I'll just have to make a better job of it while you're still alive." Skinner commented.

"You couldn't really make a better job of it than tonight." Mulder murmured with a wince.

"I'm gonna hurt for a long time."

"You deserved it." Skinner shrugged.

"I know." Mulder nodded.

"I meant what I said earlier." Skinner told him. "Foxes can be hunters, but they can also be prey. You were prey to Roche. He caught you in a trap, and you ended up getting hurt pretty bad as a result. Be more careful next time, Fox. Next time it could be the Consortium, or worse, if that's possible. I don't like punishing you, but I'd rather tan your hide a hundred times than have you fall into one of their fox hunts. Their hounds would tear you to pieces. I only chew you around the edges a bit. Take care, Fox."

Fox nodded, closing his eyes and enjoying the feeling of calm and safety, even if he hurt like hell. He didn't doubt for a moment that Skinner would save him from the Consortium if it ever came to it. Whether Skinner could save him from himself was a different matter entirely...

End of Part 4

### Tender Loving Care by Xanthe

#### **Author's Notes:**

Post Demons, Mulder is in a huge sulk. Skinner takes him away to his cabin for some TLC with inevitable consequences.

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He discharged himself from hospital against their recommendation. He was used to doing this and their protests were met only by his stony, disinterested glare. He didn't even tell Scully. His head hurt for the entire journey back to Washington but Mulder wasn't sure he cared. At least the throbbing in his temple stopped him actually having to think. His soul ached too much to think. The doctor had insisted on giving him some pills and he still wore a dressing on his forehead. Mulder flushed the pills down the toilet, closed the blinds, locked the door and pulled a dresser in front of it. Then he lay on the couch in the dark, listening to the sound of his own beating heart. He felt lost. Alone. More truly alone than at any other point in his life.

He wasn't sure how much time passed. A day. A night. Maybe more. He didn't eat, he couldn't sleep - instead he lived in a half-world, a fog of reality and nightmare, dream and illusion, recovered memories that might or might not be true. If he could just find some clarity in those memories, focus them...The phone rang and rang until he pulled it out of the socket with a sudden burst of ferocious movement that sent a wave of pain through his head and a darkness through his mind. He swayed, collapsed back down on the couch and didn't get up.

At some point there was a knock on the door. He heard Scully call his name over and over again, with some urgency. Then the sound of a key in the lock, the noise of the door thudding against the dresser.

"Mulder! I know you're in there," she cried. He didn't move, didn't speak. He wasn't even sure that he truly existed. "Mulder!" She sounded so worried and upset. Mulder didn't think he cared. He didn't care about anything. The sound of his heart beating and the throbbing in his head took over his consciousness. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again Scully had stopped calling his name.

He saw the patterns the cars made on the blinds with their headlamps as they passed by. One light, then another, a thin crack of light, moving then fading. He remembered being a child, watching the lights passing by as he tried to get to sleep, as he tried not to hear his parents arguing...about what? Or whom? Mulder realized there were tears running down his cheeks. He didn't have the energy to wipe them away.

"Mulder." A different voice this time, deeper, harder. "I'm coming in, Mulder so get away from the door." A key in the lock. Mulder closed his eyes. Safe, secure. They wouldn't find him. They couldn't touch him. Nobody was going to touch him ever again. He wasn't alive, he wasn't dead. He was somewhere between the two. In limbo. There was a crash - Mulder ignored it. Nobody could get to him, he was far, far away. There were demons in his head, laughing at him. He closed his eyes - they couldn't touch him any more. The demons had lost their power. They could laugh forever but it wouldn't matter. He was numb. They couldn't hurt him again.

"Mulder. Son." Someone was sitting next to him in the darkness. "Scully was worried about you. She gave me the key. I told her to go home and get some rest - she's worn out with chasing after you. I was worried about what I'd find." Skinner put a hand on his shoulder.

"You can't hurt me." Mulder murmured.

"I don't want to." Skinner replied. Mulder felt Skinner's hand move to his forehead. Gentle.

"This dressing needs changing. When did you last eat?"

"Nobody can hurt me."

"No. I won't let them." Skinner got up and went to the window, opening the blind, opening the window, letting in some air.

"Don't." Mulder shaded his eyes against the unwelcome light.

"Daylight can't hurt you either, Mulder." Skinner said, coming back to the couch. "You're skin and bone and you look like shit. We have to get you well again."

"I'm not moving." Mulder muttered.

"That's a lot of negative sentences, Mulder." Skinner remarked, looming over him. "Now you've told me all the things you won't do. How about letting me hear something more constructive?"

Mulder stared up distantly at the other man and Skinner sighed.

"All right. Too much to hope for maybe. Get up, Mulder. Let me change that dressing."

"No." Mulder lay there, staring into space. Skinner bent down, took hold of Mulder's sweatshirt and hauled him into a sitting position. Mulder reacted violently to the intrusion, struggling in Skinner's big hands but he had no energy and his head was swimming. He felt himself being lifted up, hauled into the bathroom, sat on the edge of the tub while Skinner

ran some water, dipped a washcloth in it and careful removed the dressing. Mulder sat there listlessly until Skinner had finished, then allowed himself to be escorted back to the other room.

"Just go away," he said. "Leave me alone."

"No." Skinner sat him down on the couch and went into the kitchen. He didn't seem surprised to find it devoid of anything that could be considered remotely "edible". With a sigh he located the phone, picked it up, held it to his ear, then shook it. He noticed the broken socket and sighed again, pulling out his cell phone. He ordered some food then returned to the couch.

"I said, go away." Mulder muttered remotely, his eyes staring at the ceiling.

"Stop this." Skinner sat down beside him. "Talk to me, Fox."

"Nothing to say." Mulder ignored him, closing his eyes. He was surprised to be pulled up again and slapped hard across the face.

"It was an order." Skinner said. Mulder felt a wave of misery penetrate the numbness inside. He was shaking as he started to scream at Skinner to get out, to go and leave him, that none of it mattered any more. He didn't remember crying but at some point the tears started to roll and he found himself whimpering with a pain inside that never went away. Skinner's arms encircled his shoulders, holding him tight while he sobbed like a baby. At some point he stopped, worn out and light-headed.

"Okay. That was good. You needed that." Skinner told him soothingly. "Now you need some sleep as well." He swung Mulder up into his arms and carried him into the bedroom, dumping him on a chair while he cleared away the junk that littered Mulder's bed.

"Get undressed," he ordered as he worked and Mulder obeyed before creeping under the sheets in his boxers and closing his eyes, feeling the sheets replaced over his shivering body. "Ssh." Skinner sat on the bed and put his hands on Mulder's shaking shoulders. Mulder stopped shivering. "Now sleep. I'll stay here." Skinner told him. Mulder nodded and closed his eyes. He didn't remember falling asleep but he must have done almost immediately.

He awoke to the smell of breakfast being cooked. He got up, swaying as the room swam around him.

"I'm not hungry," he said, padding into the kitchen in his boxer shorts.

"That fact is irrelevant." Skinner told him, putting two plates on the table and piling them high with bacon, eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, sausages and bread. Mulder stared at him quizzically. "I mean, Mulder, that you'll eat whether you're hungry or not. So why not just give in gracefully, hmm?" Skinner said. Mulder considered this for a moment, wondering what Skinner would do if he clamped his jaws shut and refused. Tie him to the chair and stick a tube down his mouth probably. He did as he was told and gave in, sitting down at the table and chewing aimlessly for several minutes on one mouthful of bacon. Skinner glanced at his watch.

"I wasn't going anywhere today," he remarked. "So you can take as long as you like. But you're not leaving this table until you've finished the entire plateful." Mulder opened his mouth to protest but then closed it with a sigh and set about the meal with more determination.

"You just let me know when you want to talk about it." Skinner said, opening up a newspaper and starting to read. Mulder glared at him.

"I won't ever want to talk about it," he replied fiercely.

"Fair enough. But I'm not leaving until you're better, whether you talk or not. So get that into your well-drilled skull, Mulder." Skinner glanced at the agent's head with a sigh. Mulder had dislodged the dressing in his sleep and he could see the wound was weeping slightly. "I spoke to your doctor. He told me you have some medication. Where is it?" Skinner asked.

"My medical treatment is confidential. The doctor had no right..." Mulder began.

"Where is it, Mulder?" Skinner interrupted him, a stern look on his face.

"In the sewer by now I expect." Mulder shrugged.

"What?" Skinner frowned. Mulder ignored him, moving a piece of tomato around his plate aimlessly. "Mulder? Did you throw your medication away?" Skinner asked incredulously.

"Yeah. That's about it." Mulder didn't look up. He felt his head grabbed between Skinner's hands and pulled up so that he was forced to look at his boss.

"I'm going to call your doctor and have him organize another prescription. Then I'm going to stand over you and make you take those pills. Understood?" Skinner asked. Mulder shrugged, making no reply. Skinner took a deep breath. "All right, Mulder. Let me spell it out for you. We can either do this the hard way or the easy way." Skinner said. "That means I can either watch you 24 hours a day, force every meal and every pill into you and put you to bed every night, or you can retain a shred of dignity and do these things for yourself. Either way they're going to get done so you take your pick as to which method you prefer."

"Oh whatever. Suit yourself." Mulder snapped, stabbing at a piece of sausage savagely with his fork and splashing himself with tomato juice in the process. It should have been funny but it wasn't. He didn't want to laugh and neither, by the look of him, did Skinner.

"Suiting myself would be to get back to work and sort out the pile of paperwork that's building up while I'm acting as nursemaid you." Skinner told him. "But like I said, you're stuck with me, Mulder. No escape." Skinner returned to his breakfast and his newspaper and didn't say another word for the rest of the meal. When Skinner had finished he called Mulder's doctor and then he called Scully.

"No, he's fine. Yes, he's eaten, or is eating I should say. No I have no idea when he'll be back. I've done that, yes. I don't know. I'll ask him." Skinner glanced at Mulder who was chewing down a mushroom as if it tasted of poison. "Will you talk to Scully?" He asked. Mulder shook his head and Skinner sighed, returning to the call. "I'm sorry, Agent Scully, but he seems to

be in - what's the technical term for it? Oh yes, one hell of a sulk. I'll make him call you just as soon as I can get him to be civil." He slammed the phone down on the table and regarded Mulder's half eaten plate of food.

"I'm a patient man, Mulder," he said. "I can wait all morning for you to finish breakfast. And if you don't manage it then I'll serve it up again cold for lunch and again for dinner if need be. But you will eat. I don't care if I have to bully you into it. And if you behave like a kid, I'll happily treat you like one. You'd better snap out of this by the time that head wound has healed - because if you are still sulking in a couple of days time I'll happily put you over my knee and spank the living daylights out of you. Is that clear?"

Mulder shrugged, forcing another forkful of bacon into his mouth.

"I really don't care," he said. "Do what the hell you like." He managed to clear the plate, then walked unsteadily into the lounge to sit on the couch, aimlessly flicking through the channels on the TV. Skinner sighed, staring after him, his hands on his hips. Then he followed him in and plucked the remote from Mulder's nerveless fingers and switched the television off.

"Get up, get showered and get dressed. We're going on a trip. I'm going to pack you some clothes," he said tersely.

"I don't want to go on a trip." Mulder stayed staring at the blank screen.

"Too bad. Now do you go and get showered or do I take you in there and wash you down myself?" Skinner asked. Mulder struggled with that for a moment and then got up.

"You should just leave," he hissed as he shoved past his boss. "I am really not in the mood for this."

"That makes two of us." Skinner muttered darkly, returning to the kitchen to clear up.

They arrived at the cabin a couple of hours later. Mulder sighed as he got out of the jeep. He remembered this place from a couple of years before - it was set in idyllic surroundings, a long way from anywhere. Somehow he wasn't surprised to find himself brought here. His boss thought that fresh air and healthy exercise were antidotes to all sorts of trauma. The psychologist in Mulder found this approach ludicrously old fashioned and simplistic.

"Go and get unpacked. I'll get lunch." Skinner told him, handing him his bag.

"Lunch?" Mulder repeated incredulously. "We've only just finished breakfast."

"That's right. And now it's lunch time." Skinner said grimly. Mulder sighed and took the bag, trudging into the cabin and finding the bedroom he had used last time he was here. He winced slightly at that memory. Skinner had been fairly tough and uncompromising then, and there was no reason to imagine that he had changed. Not that Mulder thought he had been brought out here for a repeat performance. He might have been behaving oddly for the last couple of weeks, but he didn't think Skinner intended to punish him for it. He wasn't sure that he would have cared even if that had been the case. Pain, death, eating, sleeping,

even Scully - they were all irrelevancies to him right now. He tossed the bag onto a chair, threw himself onto the bed and closed his eyes.

Skinner knocked on the door half an hour later to find Mulder asleep. He covered the agent with a blanket and sighed to himself. This was going to be hard work.

Mulder awoke some hours later with a headache. He wandered into the other room to find Skinner sitting reading a report. Skinner put it aside grimly as he came in and wordlessly got up and fetched him a glass of water and handed him two pills. Mulder didn't even bother to argue - it wasn't worth it. He swallowed the pills down and sat back, flicking at the report Skinner had been reading.

"What's this?" He asked without being remotely interested.

"Scully's report on the events of last week." Skinner informed him.

"Oh." Mulder closed his eyes.

"It makes interesting reading. But it's totally perplexing. I'm having trouble understanding some of it." Skinner commented.

"I'm sure you're going to tell me what." Mulder murmured.

"Yes. I am. Such as why a seemingly bright, intelligent young man with a great future ahead of him would allow someone to drill holes in his head - especially as he knew what this method of treatment had done to at least 2 other people." Skinner said.

"A great future!" Mulder snorted. "Yeah, right." What planet was Skinner living on? What great future? And who cared about the future anyway? "I'm more concerned about the past," he muttered. "I think that's where the truth is. And you can't face the future unless you know what happened in the past. Unless you really know."

"Why?" Skinner asked. "I once had an experience that I didn't understand. I put it behind me and carried on. It wasn't necessary for me to drill holes in my head to go back to that moment of my near death to find out exactly what had transpired."

"Well maybe you aren't as curious as I am." Mulder snapped. "Maybe it's fine for you to ignore the most important event of your whole life, but I don't feel like that. I need the truth. I NEED it."

"Why?" Skinner asked. The word hung between them for a long time but Mulder didn't have the strength to answer. Finally Skinner got up. "Lunch is ready," he said. Mulder noticed the salad on the table.

"I suppose it wouldn't make any difference if I said I wasn't hungry would it?" He asked.

"None at all." Skinner replied.

Mulder wasn't at all surprised to be hauled off on a long walk after lunch. Fresh air, brisk walks, huge meals - it was disgusting and he hated it. He remained in his own world, a world of swirling dark numbness. He by and large ignored Skinner's forays into conversation, hardly bothering to give a civil answer, not caring what the consequences for his rudeness might be. Skinner's jaw grew tighter and grimmer as the days went by but Mulder didn't care. He wasn't sure that it mattered if he pushed his boss to breaking point. Some part of him wanted to do that, wanted to make Skinner lash out at him and give up on him. Then maybe he'd get some peace. Physically he soon recovered. His head wound healed, he put on a bit of weight, he even lost the unhealthy pallor that his skin had acquired.

"Shouldn't you get back to work?" He asked his boss after 5 days of long walks and brisk swims in freezing lakes.

"I am working." Skinner told him meaningfully. Mulder scowled.

"I'm just work to you? Is that it?" He spat. "Well not any more. I'm resigning."

"I don't think so." Skinner turned his back on him.

"I mean it." Mulder told him. "I'm out of the Bureau. I'm not going back."

"Yes you are, Mulder." Skinner said with a sigh. "You're in no condition to be making decisions like that right now."

"You can't stop me. I'm leaving here right now. I'm going back to DC and I'm handing in my notice."

"No you're not." Skinner shrugged. "You can try if you like, but you aren't going anywhere. This place is miles from civilization. You won't be able to get the jeep working - I've taken care of that. So if you want to go anywhere you'll have to walk. You've never exactly shown any skill as a woodsman so I wouldn't advise it if I were you. You'll only end up getting yourself lost."

Mulder stared at his boss for a moment and then went to his bedroom and slammed the door. He half anticipated that Skinner would come charging in after him to slap him for that piece of insolence and his stomach somersaulted as he heard his boss's footsteps in the corridor. Then the door was opened and Mulder held his breath, expecting to see his boss unbuckling his belt at the very least. Instead Skinner began to undo the hinges on the door.

"What are you doing?" Mulder growled at him.

"You seem to be having problems with the doors. Every time you walk through one it slams shut behind you. I thought we could improve that little problem by taking this one off its hinges." Skinner informed him.

"But this is my bedroom..." Mulder protested.

"You'll have to sleep in a draught then won't you." Skinner picked the door up and leaned it against the wall in the corridor. "Try not to make me have to do this with all the doors in the

cabin," he said before disappearing. Mulder made a face at his retreating back.

I'm not putting up with this, Mulder thought sulkily to himself as he stared at the gap where his bedroom door should have been. Later that night, he let himself out of the cabin and set off. Skinner was right - he wasn't sure of his direction and he wasn't very good at orienteering but he was determined to go. He must have walked for miles without seeing any sign of life. He began to get worried that he could walk forever before coming across any other humans. Finally, he heard the sound of a truck and ran down the hillside, onto a road. The truck was slow, chugging up the hill and Mulder put out a hand to stop it. The driver was a huge, gnarled looking man, with enormous hands and the torso of a weightlifter. His hair was white and his face tanned and rugged. Two bright blue eyes glinted at Mulder with something like amused interest.

"You're way off the beaten track." The man commented in a deep, throaty drawl.

"Yeah. Got lost. Out walking." Mulder improvised.

"Hop in, son." The truck driver grinned. Mulder did as he was told, leaning back, feeling weary. Despite all these days of healthy exercise and regular meals he still got tired easily.

"Where are you going?" Mulder asked, unsure whether he even cared.

"Exactly where you need to go, son." Mulder was falling asleep as the man spoke and this reply didn't strike him as strange. He didn't even think about it as his head lolled back against the seat. The man glanced at Mulder and smiled.

Mulder awoke with a start. The truck had come to a clattering halt. He opened his eyes and gazed around in shock. They were back at the cabin. How was that possible? Skinner, dressed in a checked red and black shirt and black jeans was standing in the doorway. The driver got out of the truck and went over to his boss, clasped him in a bear hug and made an extremely loud hollering sound.

"Walt! Am I glad to see you again, son!" Son? Mulder glared at both his boss and the truck driver, feeling as if he had been caught in a trap. "I've brought you that stray pup that went missing." The stranger said. Skinner looked at Mulder and gestured with his head toward the cabin.

"Inside. Now." He ordered. With a sigh Mulder opened the door and got out, pushing past the two men as he returned to the cabin. This was like being trapped in some strange time loop or something - however hard you tried to escape all roads led back to this one cabin. He threw himself down on the couch and scowled angrily into the fire.

"I'm glad you could make it, Marshall." Skinner said to his friend. "I've been listening out for you for the past hour or so."

"Always happy to do you a favor, Walt. You were always one of my best men - once I got you trained right." Marshall grinned and Mulder felt the faintest stirring of curiosity. So this was the Marshall that his boss had spoken about? The one who had taught his boss these

strange disciplinary methods? And taught him the hard way. Skinner actually looked delighted to see his friend though, there was no suggestion that he harbored any resentments towards the man. Marshall was such a large man that he even dwarfed Mulder's boss, making him look almost diminutive as he stood beside his old buddy. He must have been all of 6 feet seven. "I don't do much these days anyway." Marshall was saying. "Just sit around, cleaning my gun, do a bit of tracking and hunting. Made a change to be hunting something 2 legged for once." He grinned, glancing over at Mulder.

"You were looking for me?" Mulder accused. "You didn't find me by accident?"

"Well no, son. Walt called me after you slipped out last night. I didn't have much trouble locating you - you sure leave a trail behind you!" Marshall beamed at him and Mulder made a face and stared listlessly at the fire. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Marshall exchange a glance with Skinner.

Another massive breakfast was prepared. Mulder refused his boss's invitation to assist in the cooking and sat staring out of the window instead. Which made a change from staring into the fire. If only everyone would leave him alone he was sure he would come up with some answers. Even if he didn't, he could at least enjoy the numbness inside. He didn't want to be made to feel anything, he didn't want to have to make conversation and he didn't want to be here. He just wanted to be left alone. Skinner and Marshall had other ideas though. Marshall insisted on talking to him over breakfast, although he never won more than a grunt or monosyllable from Mulder in reply. This hardly deterred him though.

"Quiet thing aren't you." He poked Mulder in the ribs as if he were some specimen in a cage. "Never got that impression from all the things Walt's said about you." Marshall grinned. "Walt... I mean, that is, Skinner's been talking about me?" Mulder looked up, curious despite himself.

"Oh yeah. We've had a couple of chats about you over the years. I always told him to be firm with you but you sure are a headache, son! The things I've heard about you! If Walt had any hair it'd be gray by now with the hoops you've had him jump through!"

"I never get away with anything. Believe me." Mulder muttered.

"Oh I do. Walt's one of the best. I don't think any of his personnel get away with much. If he learned one lesson from me, I hope he learned that." Marshall grinned.

"I learned." Skinner nodded.

"Now, Walt here's the quiet one. You may have noticed that." Marshall grinned again.

"Doesn't say much, doesn't even smile much. But he knows what he's doing. You on the other hand are one of those people who needs to be the center of attention. You make a big fuss until we all stand around staring at you. Guess that's what you're doing right now."

"You just told me I was quiet." Mulder snapped.

"Yeah - in a noisy way. You're in one of those sulks that just screams out for attention." Marshall said.

"Oh spare me the lecture." Mulder snarled. "I'm not in the mood. And I don't care what you used to do to him." He gestured with his head towards Skinner, "but if you lay one finger on me I'll report you."

"I'm not gonna touch you." Marshall regarded Mulder with a speculative stare. "Not that it's not a tempting thought because if ever someone looked like they needed to be brought to their senses it's you. But you're Walt's responsibility and he's softer on you than I think he needs to be. Maybe that's why you still keep ignoring his orders and running off like this."

"Oh for god's sake!" Mulder snarled. "I have very good reasons for ignoring his orders sometimes. And while we're on the subject, why don't you ask him how much notice he takes of his own orders when it suits him."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Marshall looked inquiringly at Mulder and then at Skinner who shook his head softly but didn't say a word.

"I mean, perhaps you should ask him about the evidence that he destroyed recently in a criminal investigation. How he covered up a murder, disposed of a body and colluded in the death of a law enforcement officer." Mulder brandished that information with a triumphant snarl. Marshall turned his attention back to his plate and carried right on eating.

"Oh that. I know all about that," he said.

"What? How?" Mulder felt as if all the wind had been taken out of his sails.

"Walter told me." Marshall glanced at Mulder and there was a look of utter contempt in his eyes. "I'm sorry you felt that you had to bring it up though, son. I think the less of you for that."

"I don't care what you damn well think of me." Mulder lied, getting to his feet and leaving the cabin, slamming the door behind him. He leaned against the cabin wall, breathing deeply, feeling angry with them and with himself. He didn't want this anger, he didn't want any feelings at all. He'd enjoyed feeling nothing, being interested in nothing, just drifting listlessly along, not caring. His head was swimming again after all the exertions of the night and it looked as if it was going to rain sometime soon but he decided to set off for a walk all the same.

It was midday when he returned and the jeep was gone. Marshall's old battered truck was still there though. Mulder took a deep breath and opened the door of the cabin. Marshall was sitting on the couch sharpening an axe. Mulder stopped, feeling worried. He didn't know anything about this crazy old man and here he was sitting with an axe.

"Where's Skinner?" He asked anxiously.

"Out getting food." Marshall got up and walked past Mulder, opening the cabin door. "Come with me." He ordered.

"Why? Where are we going? Are you going to kill me?" Mulder knew that was stupid but he didn't feel rational and that axe was very sharp.

"Are you always this quarrelsome?" Marshall asked. "No don't answer that. I think I already

know the answer. I'm going to chop us some firewood and you're going to watch."

"No I'm not. I'm tired. I'm going to bed." Mulder started to walk towards the bedroom when he felt his arm grabbed from behind in a vice-like grip. He tried to struggle but Marshall was too strong for him. "When I tell you to do something, you do it. I've eaten kids like you for breakfast so don't play games with me, son." Marshall hissed. Mulder felt himself being dragged bodily outside. He was sat down on the stump of a tree. "Stay there and don't move until I tell you." Marshall took his shirt off and began chopping some wood. "Now, from what I've seen of your behavior, you deserve a damn good thrashing." Marshall told him. "Can you enlighten me as to why Walter won't give you one?" "No." Mulder stared at his shoes.

"Fox." Marshall's tone was sharp. "You're going to stay right there until you tell me." "Or?" Mulder asked sulkily.

"Or else. I'm not as kind as Walter and this belt I'm wearing is thick and hard. Like your head, son. It's not your head I'd use it on though."

"I'm not scared of you. You can't bully me." Mulder clamped his jaws shut and sat on his hands, feeling a lump rising in his throat.

"Fine. But you aren't leaving that stump until you tell me so I suggest you give that some thought." Marshall chopped up a few more logs and Mulder stared listlessly at the sky. It was turning ominously dark and a few moments later it started to rain - big wet droplets. Mulder got up. "Where are you going?" Marshall said.

"It's raining." Mulder gestured at the sky.

"So it is. And it looks like a bad one too. Maybe a storm. But you aren't going anywhere. Sit down."

"But..." Mulder opened his mouth to protest and Marshall's hand went to his belt buckle. Mulder considered his situation for a moment and then sat down again, grinding his teeth together in frustration. Marshall moved into the shelter of the porch and gazed at the bedraggled young agent in front of him.

"You can come in and get dry any time you want. Just tell me why Walt is being so soft on you." Marshall said. Mulder put his head back and glared at the dark thunderclouds overhead.

"Because..." He began. Marshall leaned forwards.

"Yes?" He prompted.

"Because I was ill." Mulder knew that was a lie and flushed. "Okay, not ill exactly - I did something to myself that worried people."

"What did you do?" Marshall demanded. The rain started to hit in earnest, soaking Mulder to the skin.

"I...tried out an experimental technique to recover lost memories. I...I...had some holes drilled in my head." He sat there glumly, staring at Marshall, the water dripping down his nose. Marshall gazed back, his eyes wide with disbelief. Then he suddenly roared with laughter.

"You did what?" He gasped.

"I had some holes drilled in my head and then I accused my mother of...of...something bad and then I ditched Scully, she's my partner and then I wouldn't take my medication and then Skinner found me and I've been sulking ever since..." Mulder said it quickly, starting to shiver as a cold wind buffeted against his wet skin.

"Is there any more?" Marshall asked.

"Well..." Mulder considered it. "Apart from slamming doors and mouthing off and not eating properly, I suppose not, no."

"Well that sounds like enough." Marshall grunted. "Poor Walter. No wonder he calls me for advice so often. I've had to deal with some tough cases in my day but I don't think I've ever come across anyone like you. So, he's worried that this hole drilling has pushed you over the edge and that's why he's using the kid glove treatment, huh?"

"Maybe." Mulder shrugged, flushing furiously.

"No 'maybe' about it. You know that he's worried and you're using that against him so he won't punish you the way you know you deserve. That makes you a lowdown piece of work in my book, young Fox Mulder." Marshall grunted. "And then you have the nerve to turn this around on him. Bringing up that crap about the deal he did to save your own partner's life." Marshall shook his head. "I don't know why he bothers with you, Fox." He regarded the young agent coolly. "If I were him I'd have given up on you a long time ago." Mulder's head jerked up. "Ah, so that's what you're afraid of. And rightly so. Well you can still fix this, Fox, but not if you keep going about it this way."

"I don't care." Mulder muttered mutinously. "I'm wet. I want to come inside."

"Not yet." Marshall stood there in the dry comfort of the porch, his blue eyed gaze transfixing Mulder. "When Walter made that deal, the first thing he did was tell me about it. He knew he'd done wrong and he came straight to me because he trusts me and he trusts my opinion. Now you're going to do the same."

"What are you talking about?" Mulder was shivering in earnest now. He was wet through to the bone.

"I mean that when Walter gets back you're going to recount a list of your sins to him and you're going to ask him to punish you."

"Am not." Mulder knew that sounded childish but he couldn't help himself.

"Yes you are, son. Then you're going to ask him to give you a thrashing."

"Not." Mulder stared mutinously at his shoes.

"Yes you are. Then you're going to give him your own belt to do it with."

"NO!" Mulder looked up, a wave of water flooding down his face, rain mingling with the tears that had started to fall unchecked.

"Yes." Marshall's tone was gentle. "And you're going to do it because you've dug yourself into a hole and you just need to be shown a way out. Well this is the only way and I'm not saying it's easy but Walter must see something in you to keep caring about what you get up to so I think you're capable of doing this."

"I won't." Mulder folded his arms and glared at Marshall.

"You will if you want to start feeling better." Marshall shrugged. "It's up to you of course, but Walter can't stay out here taking care of you forever. You both have jobs to do."

At that moment they heard the sound of Skinner's jeep chugging up the hill.

"Can I come in now?" Mulder demanded.

"No." Marshall shrugged. "You can explain to Walter why you're sitting out in the rain." Mulder gritted his teeth again and watched as Skinner got out of the truck and ran for the porch, clutching a bag of groceries to his chest.

"Mulder?" Skinner stopped and gave his agent a quizzical look. "You want to come in out of the rain?"

"No." Mulder muttered, folding his arms.

"Uh, okay." Skinner shrugged, looking mystified. "You want to tell me why?"

"No." Mulder said again.

"Fine." Skinner gave another baffled shrug and went into the cabin with Marshall close behind him.

"Whenever you want to come in, we'll be waiting." Marshall said softly. Mulder didn't reply.

He sat there for half an hour, considering what he should do. He couldn't run away again - that hadn't exactly been a success last time. And he couldn't stay here either. He wondered if he could go back into the cabin and not obey Marshall, just walk in and go to his bedroom, ignoring them both. He wished he had the courage for that, but there was something about Marshall that scared him. He wouldn't put it past the old man to grab hold of him, force him bodily over his knee and give him the thrashing he seemed so sure Mulder deserved. Mulder's stomach crawled again. He didn't want to be beaten. He realized, with some surprise, that he wanted to go home. He wanted to see Scully and go back to work and most of all, he wanted everything to be back to normal with Skinner. He found himself getting to his feet and walking reluctantly over to the cabin. He stood on the porch for a long while, thinking frantically. He almost turned back but something inside spurred him on and finally he pushed the door open and stood there in the doorway, dripping rainwater onto the wooden floor.

"Mulder. Glad you could join us." Skinner looked up. He was sitting on the couch working his way through some papers. Marshall was standing by the fire, a pipe in his mouth. Mulder

was sure that Marshall hadn't enlightened Skinner as to why his most brilliant agent was taking an impromptu shower in the yard.

"I..." Mulder hesitated. Skinner raised an eyebrow.

"Yes?" He asked. Mulder looked at Marshall helplessly but the other man's blue eyes were firm and uncompromising.

"I...wanted to say..." Mulder stopped and closed his eyes.

"In your own time, Mulder. I'm not going anywhere." Skinner turned back to his paperwork. Mulder stood there for another few minutes, struggling with it before giving in.

"I wanted to say sorry." Mulder gasped that out as quickly as he could. Skinner looked up at him again and put his paperwork on one side.

"Sorry for what?" Skinner asked.

"For..." Mulder took a deep breath. This was getting harder, not easier. "For...all of it." He muttered at last, but Marshall's expression made it clear that wasn't good enough. "For the holes, for ditching Scully, for not taking my medication, for sulking, for trying to run away..." He trailed off.

"What about that threat to resign?" Skinner asked.

"I never meant that." Mulder admitted. "I was just trying to..."

"Yes?" Skinner asked gently.

"I wanted to make you feel as lousy as I was feeling. It was emotional blackmail. I am sorry." He suddenly realized that he meant that.

"Thank you, Fox. I appreciate that. Does this mean you're back with us?" Skinner asked.

"I guess so." Mulder shrugged.

"Good. Then I think we can put this behind us and..." Mulder breathed a sigh of relief and then noticed the expression on Marshall's face. His heart sank.

"No." He interrupted. Skinner looked surprised.

"I...have to...that is...you should punish me. I'm better now and...and I deserve it," he whispered.

"Well, I wouldn't disagree with that." Skinner said, getting up and looking at the young agent keenly. "But I'm surprised to hear you suggesting it."

"I know. I don't want to be punished but I've been behaving like a spoilt brat so you should whip me. Here." Mulder undid his belt and pulled it out from his jeans, handing it to his boss. Skinner looked even more surprised.

"All right, Mulder. I think you're right. Get your pants and boxer shorts off and get over here." Skinner shook his head, stunned at the turn of events. He folded the belt in two and

thwapped it against the palm of his hand a couple of times. Mulder felt his stomach lurch as he undressed. "Bend over and hold onto your ankles." Skinner said and Mulder complied, feeling the warmth of the fire on the back of his legs. Skinner placed a hand on the small of his back and drew his arm back. Mulder closed his eyes and waited. He had never yet known Skinner to stint on a thrashing and this was no exception. He knew that Skinner worked on the principle that if he was going to deliver a whipping at all then it should hurt - no half measures. The first blow confirmed that for Mulder. He yelped and jumped up. Skinner's hand pushed him back down again. "Stand still, son. I'll go fast so it'll soon be over." Skinner's arm moved again and Mulder cursed out loud as he tried to keep on his feet while the blows rained down on his butt. "Shit, shit, shit..." He yelled over and over again but Skinner was implacable and the belt continued to rise and fall, liberally marking Mulder's butt with a series of red lines. Skinner paused for a moment.

"Is that enough do you think, Mulder?" He asked. Oh god, yes! Mulder thought and then he glanced up and caught Marshall's eye and he felt his heart sink. He knew deep inside that Skinner had just given him a light spanking - nothing compared to what he deserved.

"No." He whispered, closing his eyes. "I...er, think I deserve more." He said.

"Good, because so do I. I'm glad we agree." Skinner delivered another series of hard blows. "I think that about covers the sulking and ditching Scully," he said. "But what can I do that will convey to you how I feel about that so-called medical treatment you put yourself through?"

"I don't know." Mulder shuddered.

"Come here." Skinner sat down and Mulder stood up, his muscles protesting as he straightened. "Over my knee." Skinner pointed and Mulder sighed. He hated it when Skinner did this. And Skinner knew he hated it and that was why he did it. Mulder walked over resignedly and knelt down, arranging himself cautiously over Skinner's legs. Skinner put his hand on Mulder's back again, holding him pinned down firmly and the next blow was harder than anything Mulder could remember. He screamed.

"Don't ever, ever, do anything like that again, Mulder." Skinner said, raining down 3 more blows.

"I won't." Mulder sobbed.

"I mean it. If you ever worry us like that again, if you ever endanger your life recklessly like that, doing something so foolhardy, so thoughtless, then we're through, Fox. And I mean that." Skinner slapped down another few blows on Mulder's blistered flesh until Mulder began to weep in earnest. Then Skinner stopped and sat back. "All right, son. All done." Mulder eased himself off Skinner's knee and crouched on the carpet, his eyes filled with tears.

"I didn't realize," he said, horrified. "Shit, I was so stupid." He shook his head.

"Yes, you were. Mind you, we're used to that." Skinner smiled and handed Mulder his belt back. Mulder took it wordlessly, putting his boxer shorts and jeans back on, relieved to feel

the cool rain-sodden garments against his flaming flesh. His mind was in turmoil as he saw his behavior of the past few weeks in a different light.

"Oh shit." He whispered. "I really am sorry. I've screwed everything up." His body was racked with sobs as he crouched cautiously on the floor next to his boss, burying his head in Skinner's knee and crying his heart out. Skinner ruffled his hand through Mulder's hair, his fingers finding the scars on his head and fingering them gently.

"You're still alive. That's more than those other poor bastards who underwent this so-called medical treatment can say." Skinner said softly. "I'm glad you're still with us, Fox. Come on. Ssh." He stroked Mulder's shoulders gently and Mulder nodded and wiped his tears away.

"I'm okay. I feel better now." He managed a weak smile in Marshall's direction and the other man nodded at him. "Shit, I'm hungry." Mulder announced, surprised by the raw emptiness in his belly. "I need food, sir!"

"You mean you'll eat without me forcing it down your throat?" Skinner asked in surprise.

"You bet. I'm starving." Mulder grinned, getting to his feet carefully and walking to the kitchen. "I hope you've stocked up. I could eat a horse. No offense, sir, but you've been a bit stingy with the meals." And so saying he disappeared into the kitchen leaving Skinner staring after him, open-mouthed.

"You know, Walter." Marshall grunted. "When I get home I'm going to make you a nice, thick leather strap for you to keep hanging somewhere in plain sight so that young pup can set eyes on it every day. Somehow I think you'll be needing it..."

END OF PART FIVE

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