

The Test by Xanthe

<http://www.xanthe.org/the-test/>

Story Notes:

This story is a New Year present for Brown Eyed Girl, Cadillac Red, Dianne, Mangst, Mudsprite, and Xraycat. Thank you for all the wonderful stories you wrote during 1998.

I hope you enjoy this one. I packed as much in as I could. Many thanks to Mudsprite for beta reading.

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"And that's the last of the paperwork on that case, sir." Mulder presented Skinner with a bulging file of neatly presented work. "And if you wouldn't mind just signing this 302..." He placed the fully completed request on Skinner's desk. Skinner nodded, surveying the paperwork with barely concealed satisfaction. The change in Mulder over the past couple of months was nothing short of miraculous in his view. If he'd known what a difference corporal punishment would make to his errant young agent, he'd have applied a cane to his backside years ago. He hadn't even had occasion to punish Mulder since that morning in Oxford, and he was secretly relieved about that.

Not that Mulder had behaved perfectly since their return. There had been a couple of outbursts in meetings, the usual squabbles with other agents, but Skinner had found that one raised eyebrow in Mulder's direction quelled any trouble. Mulder would quite literally bite down on his lip and refrain from inflaming the situation. The one thing Mulder hadn't done was to take off on his own, which inevitably ended up with him risking life and limb in pursuit of one of his quests. Skinner sincerely hoped that Mulder's change of attitude was due to the new relationship the two men had forged, and the fact that Mulder now had someone to rely on, someone who would listen to him and counsel him.

Since their trip to England, Skinner had done his best to get to know the younger man better - inviting him out to meals, working out with him in the gym, teaching him how to scuba dive. Mulder had responded to this sort of treatment with an enthusiasm and shyly endearing pleasure that Skinner would never have suspected. Skinner was a loner, by inclination as well as circumstance, and he had simply never expected that a man like Mulder would take any pleasure in his company. He had been completely taken aback to find that instead of Mulder viewing their trips together as some sort of ordeal, or facing the prospect of small talk with his boss with horror, he seemed instead to look forward to them eagerly. Far from the talk being "small", once Mulder got started he seemed able to rattle on endlessly on a myriad of topics, so that Skinner barely got a word in edgeways. The Assistant Director had always been a good listener though, and he, in turn, found himself enjoying Mulder's company more than he would have expected.

Skinner came to the conclusion that Mulder was the sort of man who needed a steady "mentor" influence in his life, and as the months passed, he relaxed into the role and began to actively enjoy it. A part of him was still aware of how much of a responsibility it was, but the pluses of the arrangement, seemed to more than balance out the minuses. Skinner was hopeful that it wouldn't be necessary for either of them to have to repeat the moment back in Oxford, when he had been forced to remind Mulder who was in charge, and what sort of punishment he could expect for his misdeeds.

Skinner sat back in his chair, finished reading the 302, and signed it with a flourish, handing it back to Mulder with a smile.

"What?" Mulder stopped, wondering why Skinner was looking at him so intently.

"You." Skinner shook his head, laughing softly. "There were times when you seemed to view a 302 as an optional extra, to be completed if you felt like it."

"Oh," Mulder shifted uncomfortably and gave a wry shrug. "Well, you know. Anything to make your job easier, sir." He gave a wide, outrageously cheesy smile.

"Don't suck up, Mulder," Skinner chuckled. "Want to join me for a work out later?"

"I can't." Mulder looked uncomfortable. Skinner glanced at him in surprise. It was the first invitation that Mulder had turned down since their new working relationship had begun.

"I'm, uh, meeting an old friend." Mulder picked up the 302, and stuffed it into his pocket hurriedly.

"An old friend?" Skinner tried to stop him, but Mulder was clearly in no mood to talk.

"Yeah. Another time." Mulder slipped out of the door, and was gone before Skinner could ask him any more questions.

Mulder rushed home straight from work, changed quickly into his jeans and a sweater, and grabbed a thick, warm jacket, before rummaging around in his closet for a pair of binoculars. He paused only to collect the messages on his answering machine.

"Mulder - it's Mac. Are we still on for tonight at 8? I'm so looking forward to having dinner with you and catching up on your news. I'm staying at the Plaza Hotel, as I told you last week. If you can't make tonight, please call."

Mulder glanced at his watch, chewing on his lip. He hesitated for a moment, then, with a guilty shake of his head, he ran out of the door, slamming it shut behind him.

Skinner didn't get back home until 9pm, clutching take out and a bottle of wine which he intended to consume alone. He had just finished the meal, when the entryphone buzzed.

"Mr Skinner? We have a Dr Macclesfield in the lobby." The doorman told him.

"Dr Macclesfield?" Skinner had to think about it for a moment. <Of course! Mulder's tutor from Oxford. What the hell is he doing here?> "Send him up," he instructed tersely, crossing his fingers and hoping this didn't have anything to do with Mulder's strangely evasive attitude earlier in the day. <Give him the benefit of the doubt, Walter. He hasn't done anything to betray the trust you've placed in him. Not yet anyway!>

Mulder stamped his feet trying to keep warm. He still felt guilty about running out on Mac without explanation, but this was important dammit! It had been a long time since he'd had to explain himself to anyone, or justify his actions, and he didn't want Mac cramping his style. All the same, it would have been nice to see Mac again. He blew on his cold fingers, wishing he'd brought some gloves. He hoped Mac wouldn't be angry. <It's not Mac you have to worry about now, Mulder. It's Skinner! What was it Mac said? 'Handing over the baton'? What am I, some kind of relay race now? A parcel to just be handed over whenever. Fuck it. Fuck them!>

<You don't mean that. You're just feeling guilty for ditching Mac so you're getting angry with him instead of yourself.>

<What the fuck do you know? You're supposed to be on my side!>

<I am on your side. I know you too well>

<Of course you do. You're me.>

<Have you ever thought there might be something a bit schizophrenic about holding conversations with yourself like this?>

<Oh shut up.> Mulder jogged up and down on the spot for a while, trying to both warm himself up and stifle the incessant internal monologue.

"My dear Mr. Skinner." Dr Macclesfield swept into his apartment and gave the Assistant Director a firm shake of the hand. "I'm so sorry to disturb you at this late hour."

"No, it's fine." Skinner offered his visitor a glass of wine, which was gratefully accepted, and gestured him to the couch. "How can I help you, Dr Macclesfield?"

"Oh please call me Mac." The professor gave a smile, and ran a weary hand through his thick white hair.

"Mac?" Skinner couldn't help raising an eyebrow.

"Mulder's not the only one who hates his first name, I'm afraid." Mac shook his head ruefully. "Please don't tell anyone, Mr. Skinner, but my first name is Cyril. It's not a name I'm particularly fond of, so everybody calls me Mac."

"I see." Skinner smiled. "I'm not exactly fond of Walter, you know, but please feel free to call me by my first name."

"Thank you, Walter," Mac nodded, giving Skinner a wide smile. "Hating our names was one way of finding a common bond with Mulder back in the bad old days when he was a new and destructive force on our happy little university soil."

"He must have been a handful," Skinner commiserated, sipping his wine.

"You have no idea." Mac gave a heartfelt sigh. "I promised to call him Mulder, if he'd call me Mac. That impressed him - it made me seem less authoritarian to him. He's not very fond of authority."

"Tell me about it!" Skinner shook his head.

"He was worse back then!" Mac laughed out loud. "I think I managed to get some sense into his head. Trust me, you have the much improved and polished version of our dear Mulder, compared to the 17 year old wild child that I had to tame."

"I can imagine." Skinner sat back and gazed at his guest, intrigued.

"You're wondering why I'm here?" Mac's green eyes met Skinner's dark ones.

"Well, I'm assuming that you've come straight from your meeting with Mulder..." Skinner began, but he trailed off as he caught the flash of concern in Mac's eyes.

"As a matter of fact, no. I was hoping to meet with him this evening - I'm only in DC for a couple of days attending a seminar. We made arrangements to meet up, but I'll admit they were fairly vague. When I went to his apartment he wasn't there. I assumed that he got called away. That's when I thought to try you - just to make sure that nothing was amiss."

"I invited Mulder to a work out, but he told me he had to meet an old friend," Skinner

sighed, putting down his wine glass and going over to his briefcase to inspect the copy of the 302 that was in there. "There's nothing urgent here." Skinner shook his head. "Just a request to investigate a...uh...unidentified reptilian life form recently reported in the Potomac."

"Ah, some sort of dinosaur I expect," Mac nodded sagely. "We have one of those in Loch Ness in Scotland. There are new sightings every couple of years, just when the local tourism looks like flagging," he remarked cynically. Skinner gave a low, rumbling laugh.

"A man after my own heart," he chuckled. "Still, it's Mulder's passion, and he has been proved right on too many occasions for me to dismiss his work off-handedly."

"Good." Mac nodded. "Mulder is quite the most brilliant student I ever had. Just because his thinking isn't mainstream, doesn't mean it's invalid. I'm glad you take a similar view, Walter."

"I do. The question is - where is Mulder now?" Skinner mused.

"Well, I'm not too worried. As I said, our arrangement was vague." Mac waved a hand in the air. "I'm sure he's busy out looking for monsters."

"Hmm." Skinner gazed at the 302 for a moment.

"You think something is wrong?" Mac asked.

"Well, he did say he was meeting an old friend, and I assume he meant you. From the way he talks about you, I'd be surprised if he'd pass up on an opportunity to see you. On the other hand..."

"Yes?"

"It's just that he's been so well behaved since..." Skinner flushed slightly. "I mean, after what happened in Oxford, I'd hate to think that he lied to me deliberately."

Mac leaned back with a sigh.

"I told you, Walter, Mulder is a special case. The normal rules don't apply to him. I've lost count of the number of times he charmed me into thinking he was the most good natured, well behaved boy in the whole world, immediately prior to causing the most dreadful incident.. And it wasn't deliberate manipulation - I think he was genuinely eager to please. Our good opinion matters to him a lot. However, the devil lurking in Mulder's breast can never be entirely stilled, I'm afraid, Walter. I learned that a long time ago."

Mulder turned his jog into a little dance, then he began to hum, but it was no use. That

voice just kept goading him.

<Remember how nice Mac was to you when you first met him? How he took you under his wing, took care of you. And Skinner's been nice to you as well recently hasn't he? What are you doing here, Mulder? You shouldn't be lying to them.>

<I'm not listening!> Mulder put his hands theatrically over his ears but all the same, his mind wandered back in time.

"I'm intrigued." Skinner returned to the couch and offered his guest another glass of wine which was gratefully accepted. "As to how the hell you decided on your, uh, unorthodox approach to keeping Mulder in line in the first place."

Mac's face creased into a smile.

"Well, it's not a story I'd share with anyone but you, Walter. But I think it's only fair that you should have the benefit of my experience. You're going to need all the help you can get dealing with this troublesome lad."

Taking a sip of wine, Mac cleared his throat and launched into his tale.

Dr Macclesfield followed the policeman along a corridor and waited while a cell door was opened. He peered into the cell, and saw three men sitting there: one sleeping, one clearly the worse for drink, and a third who was crouched against the wall, clutching an academic gown to his chest. He was a skinny boy, about 17 years old, with a long floppy mass of hair, and scared, defiant, hazel eyes. His clothing was torn and stained, and his knuckles were bruised.

"I'm looking for a...Fox Mulder," Mac said.

"That's me." The boy got up, trying to keep the remnants of his torn shirt together.

"Ah." Mac looked him up and down for a few seconds, taking in the boy's tired, pale face, and the sadness and vulnerability behind the defiant facade.

"Well are you just gonna look at me or are you gonna get me out of here?" The youth fumed in an American accent. "You are the tutor guy aren't you? Dr Macclesfield?"

"Yes, my dear boy. I am." Dr Macclesfield's eyes twinkled with amusement which just

seemed to make Mulder even more angry.

"Well then. Can I go?" The boy pushed his way past the policeman and the tutor, and out into the corridor.

"It is more usual for tutors to be introduced to their new charges during an informal drinks session in the first week of term. I do admire your refreshing approach, Fox," Dr Macclesfield murmured, as they exited from the police station after the paperwork was completed.

"Well, I didn't know anyone else..." Mulder muttered. "They said that because of my age, someone had to pick me up. I only got here on Saturday. I didn't know who else to ask. I had your name written down as my tutor so I told them to contact you. And don't call me Fox."

"Why? Isn't it your name?" Dr Macclesfield waved his hand at the Volkswagen Beetle painted in psychedelic patterns parked nearby. Mulder grimaced.

"Yeah, it's my name, but I don't want anyone using it," he grunted. "This is your car?"

"Yes, my dear...uh, hmm, what shall we call you then? Does the dear boy have a favorite nickname perhaps? Or an alternative moniker he wishes to use? A nom de plume maybe...?"

"Mulder's fine. The car isn't. The sixties are over you know." Mulder gave Dr Macclesfield a look of barely disguised disgust, and folded his long legs into the meager passenger space in the front of the car.

"Hmm. Charmed to meet you too, my surly young friend." Mac gave a chuckle as he got in beside his errant charge.

Mulder got out quickly as soon as they drew up at the college. He slammed the door, kicked the car wheel unnecessarily, and slouched off in the direction of his rooms.

"Mulder." Dr Macclesfield stood there watching him, that same amused twinkle still flashing in his eyes.

"Yeah?" Mulder sunk his hands deep into his pockets and carried on walking.

"I rather think that we have something to discuss, don't you?"

"What?" Mulder turned around and glared at his tutor from under his floppy hair.

"The small matter of what happened last night, and how it came to lead to your state of attire this morning?" Mac glanced pointedly at Mulder's torn and dirty clothing.

"Oh." Mulder stood there for a moment, weighing it up. He didn't know much about the rules that governed this weird place. Last night had shown him that all too well. He wasn't sure how far he could push this guy and get away with it. He didn't look too frightening

though, with that stupid painted car with all its yellow and pink squiggles, and that idiotic smile on his face. Mulder decided to risk it. "I don't wanna talk about it," he said sulkily, turning on his heel and walking off. He was surprised to find a large, immaculately manicured hand descending on his shoulder a few seconds later.

"Well, you see, the problem is that I do." The professor said, drawing him off in a different direction. "And I think we'll do what I want in the circumstances."

Mulder struggled momentarily, then gave in when he worked out the math of the extra 40 odd pounds that his tutor had on him, to say nothing of the air of quiet authority that exuded from him.

Dr Macclesfield opened the door to his study and ushered Mulder in.

"Sit down, Mulder. I'll make us some breakfast shall I? Something tells me that you never had dinner last night."

"Have you been spying on me? What did they tell you about me?" Mulder rounded on him furiously.

"Nothing." Mac raised an eyebrow at Mulder's tone. "But your stomach rumbled during the entire car journey back here, so you're clearly hungry. And believe me, I haven't worked with young people for this long without picking up a few clues as to their behavior along the way. I've never known a young man of your age who wasn't hungry to be honest. Now, I can manage toast and crumpets. Does that sound about right?"

"Whatever." Mulder threw himself down on a badly upholstered armchair as his tutor put the kettle on and busied himself making breakfast. He brought over a plateful of toast, and various pots of items that called themselves "marmite" and "jam". Mulder eyed them suspiciously, and opted for honey instead. He would have much preferred not to eat, but the professor was right, he was ravenous, and he couldn't stop himself demolishing the entire plateful of food.

"Now..." Mac leaned back in his chair, cradling a large mug of tea, into which he had spooned several heaped measures of sugar. "Perhaps you'd like to tell me what happened last night?"

"No." Mulder put the empty plate down on the floor and stared into the fire grate with glazed eyes.

"Well, I have all day." Mac sipped his tea quietly, flicking through an academic journal. "Whenever you're ready," he said, finishing his tea, and getting up to sit at his desk. He put on his spectacles, and busied himself reading through his mail.

Mulder sat there for half an hour, silently arguing with himself, and then got to his feet. Mac glanced up at him.

"Can I go now?" Mulder spat.

"Of course," Mac said smoothly. Mulder hurried over to the door.

"Just as soon as you tell me what happened last night," Mac added. Mulder stopped, hopping nervously from one foot to the other.

"I don't want to," he growled.

"Well, I can wait. Why don't you sit over there in the window seat, and let me know when you're ready, hmm? I have work to do in the meantime."

Mac got up and led Mulder over to the window seat, then he returned to his desk. Mulder sat down glumly, mentally judging the distance between the window and the door, wondering if he could make it before the professor got there. He decided against it. There was something scary about this guy, with his polite manners and stupid car. Mulder drew a face on the condensation on the window pane.

"How long before he gave in?" Skinner asked, grinning at his guest and getting up to open another bottle of wine.

"Four hours I believe." Mac grinned back. "I'm glad he did. I was getting rather desperate to use the lavatory."

"I bet he was too!" Skinner chuckled. "I bet that's why he gave in."

"Probably," Mac nodded. "His stubbornness is legendary of course. I'm just lucky that we're not both still sitting there."

"I had to dine in the formal hall, or whatever the hell they call it." Mulder said suddenly and unexpectedly, blowing on the window to create more condensation, and then drawing another face on it. "And you have to wear that stupid gown when you dine in there." He pointed at the academic gown lying on the floor of Mac's office, where he'd thrown it. "I didn't know that, so they turned me away. I went back for it, but I was so angry. When I got in, I took it off. Someone made a point about me not wearing it, so I...I guess I lost it," he admitted lamely, finally looking at the professor for the first time.

Mac stopped what he was doing and turned his full attention to the young man in his study.

"You got into a fight over a gown?" Mac asked.

"Yeah." Mulder flushed. "Well, I lost the fight. Then I got thrown out into the street. I tried to get back in, but someone called the police and I ended up in custody."

"And all this without even being drunk?" Mac whistled. "How extraordinary. I'm impressed."

"I don't know the rules here," Mulder said sadly. "I don't understand things. Why do we have to wear these stupid gowns? Why do things have stupid names? I don't know where things are. People laugh at me..."

"Mulder, every establishment has its own little ways of doing things. Humor us, please, and you'll find that we're more than happy to humor you and your little foibles. Now, next time you feel one of these murderous impulses coming upon you, or everything seems too much for you, why don't you just turn around and bring yourself up here. I won't ask any questions if you don't want me to. You can just sit in here until you calm down. Deal?"

Mulder stared at the professor for a moment, chewing on his lip.

"I won't get into any trouble?" He asked after thinking about it for a few moments.

"Not unless you cause any." Mac flashed a smile at him.

"What about last night? Am I in trouble for that?" Mulder asked anxiously.

"Of course not. You were confused and unhappy. I wouldn't care to see a repeat of last night, though, Mulder. Especially as you now have a friend who can give you all the help, advice and support that you need."

"I do?" Mulder looked up. "Who?" he asked.

Mac shook his head in amazement. "Me, Mulder. Me," he said.

"Oh, I thought you meant someone my own age. I mean, you're a tutor. You're kind of in charge and stuff, Dr Macclesfield, and..."

"And you think that means we can't be friends? Nonsense," Mac said briskly. "Now it's lunchtime, so I suggest that I show you one of my favorite restaurants. And please, let's not be formal. You can call me Mac."

"So that was your first meeting? Mine was just as auspicious." Skinner recounted the story of how he had called Mulder into his office and forbade him to continue with an investigation.

"And did he follow your orders?" Mac asked.

"Did he hell!" Skinner snorted into his drink.

"Oh dear," Mac laughed.

"What made you decide to resort to, uh, extreme measures?" Skinner asked. Mac's smile faded.

"It wasn't a decision I made lightly," he said with a sigh. "I'd worked in a quite famous boy's public school for several years, and the cane was commonplace there. Mulder was no older than some of the boys I'd punished in this way as a headmaster. However, he was a university student, and, contrary to myth, the English don't usually use corporal punishment on their undergraduates. Mulder was a special case though. I risked my job to keep him at Oxford. I could see that he was brilliant, and the same rules don't apply to geniuses as apply to other people, as I'm sure you've had cause to learn, Walter."

"Yeah. Oh yeah." Skinner nodded.

"They have to be treated differently - and I'd seen boys like Mulder respond well to this sort of discipline before. Not just handed out by someone uncaring and unfeeling, mind. Only as part of an ongoing, supportive and encouraging relationship. Mulder and I already had that. Did he tell you about the occasion when he broke into the library?"

"He mentioned it, yes," Skinner nodded.

"He had some bee in his bonnet about the fact that he wasn't allowed access to some of the documents filed in there. Maybe he had a point, but his way of making it was unacceptable. He got caught, of course," Mac sighed. "I spent half the day with the local police, and the other half with the Vice Chancellor. I fought tooth and nail to keep Mulder in the university. He was absolutely terrified of being sent home."

"Things weren't too good at home." Skinner commented.

"I'd gathered that," Mac nodded. "But by the time I got back to my study I was at the end of my tether. I knew the only way to save Mulder from himself, and to make sure he got through his university days and graduated with a degree, was to make his punishment a hard and effective one. I had to do something extreme to get into that wayward mind of his and make an impression. That's when I decided on the cane. Of course, if he'd made a complaint, I could have been chucked out myself, but I thought he was worth taking a risk on. I had no idea that the dear boy would still be in need of discipline 20 odd years later!"

Mac got back to his study to find Mulder sitting there, in his usual window seat, a look of abject fear warring with defiance on his face.

"Mac, I'm sorry. I screwed up." Mulder muttered, looking up anxiously at his tutor through his hair. "What's gonna happen? Are they gonna throw me out? Mac, I don't want to go home." He gave his tutor a pleading look. "What did they say? What are they going to do? Are they going to charge me?"

"No, Mulder. Not this time." Mac sighed, sitting down in the chair behind his desk. "Mulder, come and stand here." He rapped out firmly, pointing to the front of his desk. Mulder looked up with a start at his tutor's tone, and hopped over to the desk, standing nervously in front of it.

"How old are you now, Mulder?" Mac asked.

"Uh, 18." Mulder shrugged. "Why?"

"I was just wondering when you were going to grow up," Mac said sternly.

"I don't know," Mulder muttered sullenly.

"I was also wondering whether you were too old to be spanked," Mac said, watching Mulder's reaction. His head jerked up.

"Spanked, Mac? You're not serious, are you?" His voice wavered pathetically.

"Yes, I am. I just went out of my way to save your hide today, Mulder, and I promised both the police and the Vice Chancellor that you'd be severely punished for last night's escapade. What I have in mind is extremely painful, but I'm of the opinion that you deserve it."

"What you gonna do?" Mulder chewed on his lip.

"Cane you." Mac fumbled around in his umbrella stand for a moment, finally finding an old bamboo cane. "It's a first offense, so I'll be more lenient than I would normally. How does ten sound?" Mac asked.

"Ten...what?" Mulder's eyes were transfixed by the cane.

"Strokes." Mac swung it through the air a couple of times.

"Uh...where?" Mulder asked.

"Traditionally, I can only think of one place." Mac said. "Trousers down, Mulder, and bend over my desk."

Mulder flushed a deep red.

"No, you're not going to...I'm too old. They should have let me read the stuff I wanted to! I didn't do anything wrong breaking into the library. I didn't damage anything. I..." He trailed off, looking at Mac's implacable face.

"I won't get sent home?" he asked.

"No." Mac shook his head. "But if you walk out of here now I won't be able to protect you again, Mulder. If you deliberately flout the rules, you must expect consequences. You can't imagine that you can just do whatever you want and rely on me to get you out of trouble."

Mulder flushed again, staring at his shoes.

"Was it really hard to convince them to let me stay?" he whispered.

"Yes, Mulder. Very hard." Mac waited.

"I do have to be punished don't I?" He chewed on his bottom lip.

"Yes, Mulder. You do."

The young man nodded, and undid his jeans, blushing furiously as he lowered them down his legs, and bent over the desk. Mac tugged his briefs down as well, ignoring Mulder's whimper of protest, and then set about the caning, delivering it with a firm hand, as fast as he could, to get it over with as soon as possible. Afterwards Mulder stood up shakily, righting his clothing, tears rolling down his cheeks. Mac threw the cane back into the umbrella stand with a sigh, feeling sure that he had just done the wrong thing, and ruined the fragile bond of trust that he had built up with this young man. He felt a tugging on his sleeve and turned back to find Mulder standing there, looking lost and forlorn.

"Are you still angry with me, Mac?" he asked anxiously.

"No, Mulder. Of course not. It's over now." Mac nearly wept himself from the relief that registered on Mulder's tear-stained face. He ushered Mulder over to the fire, and brought him a mug of the sweet tea that he liked himself and which Mulder now copied him by drinking. He also cut him a generous slice of chocolate cake.

"I'm sorry for crying," Mulder accepted the cake, wiping his tears away with his shirt sleeve. "I won't cry next time, Mac. I promise."

"Next time?" Mac put his arms around the student, and hugged him. "Oh god, Mulder," he said into the young man's hair. "Please, please, don't let there be a next time."

"But there was?" Skinner sighed.

"Unfortunately yes. You know our dear young friend's propensity for getting into trouble." Mac made a face. "But it always worked, Walter. He would be a model student for several weeks afterwards. Of course he couldn't keep it up forever, it's not in his nature, but those few weeks were blissful. He'd be charming, erudite, entertaining, and totally loveable."

"That's how he's been with me recently," Skinner grunted.

"I'm afraid, Walter, that sooner or later, he'll test your limits. That's just Mulder. He'll need to get the measure of you, see how far he can push you before you snap."

"Oh god." Skinner put his head back and groaned. "I'm not looking forward to this, Mac. How should I play it?"

"Try not to let it get too far. Remind him who's in charge before he gets out of hand. Right now, he's got you lulled into a false sense of security. Trust me, I've been there with him! Just when you think he's mended his ways, and turned over a new leaf, he does something so appalling that it's all you can do to keep your temper or stay sane! In the beginning, he tested me a lot - I think he just wanted to know what the limits were. I expect he'll do the same to you, to be honest with you, Walter."

"He's a lot older now..." Skinner pointed out.

"Yes, but still the same old Mulder," Mac sighed. "When I visited him last year I couldn't believe how much his behavior had deteriorated without me around to keep a constant eye on him. It's not just his disregard for the people who care about him, and the lunatic ideas he gets into his head, it's the way he risks his own personal safety as well. I dread to think that one day he'll kill himself because nobody was looking out for him, or reminding him how valuable he is to us."

"I'm with you on all of that," Skinner nodded. "And I'm glad you came over here this evening, Mac. I've been shirking the heavier side of my duties where Mulder is concerned. I think a small reminder is required."

"Very wise, Walter. Very wise. And on that note, I think I should go." Mac glanced at his watch. "Goodness! It is late. I'm so pleased to talk to you, Walter. And I'm delighted to have found somebody worthy of taking over the onerous task of looking out for Mulder. He deserves the best, and I think you're that."

Skinner flushed at the unexpected compliment. Mac really had a way of making people feel valued and appreciated. The two men shook hands, and he escorted Mac to the door.

"When I catch up with Mulder I'll tell him to call and apologize for standing you up tonight," he said.

"I'm sure you will!" Mac chuckled. "Thank you for the wine, and such an enjoyable evening, Walter. Here's my mobile phone number, what do you call them? Cellphones?" He handed

Skinner a card. "Call me any time, night or day, if you need any advice."

"I will," Skinner said, with heartfelt gratitude.

Mulder pulled the collar of his jacket tight around his throat, wishing he'd chosen warmer clothing for this stake-out. He picked up his binoculars and glanced through them again, his eyes skimming the dark water for the hundredth time. Nothing. He chewed on his lip, still arguing with his conscience. He didn't like to think of his old tutor standing outside his apartment. Mac didn't deserve that. Mulder knew that he'd laid his job on the line to bail Mulder out several times in the past, just as Skinner had. He also knew that it was only due to Mac's efforts that he had left Oxford with a degree instead of a criminal record. That would have put an end to his FBI career before it even began. And now Mac had placed him in Skinner's charge. Mulder winced, still remembering the pain and humiliation of the caning Skinner had delivered a couple of months previously. <How the hell do I get myself into these situations?> he thought mutinously. <Why do people think it's okay to treat me as if I'm a kid? Why does Mac think I still need that kind of discipline? Why does Skinner?>

He considered the Skinner problem for a moment. Skinner wasn't Mac, and Mulder seriously doubted whether his boss had the stomach for the sort of discipline Mac handed out. Beneath Mac's urbane, cheerful exterior, there was a streak of tempered steel. Skinner was the opposite. He exuded toughness, and authority, but Mulder was sure that underneath he was as soft as a marshmallow. Mulder made a subconscious decision to test the waters, and find out just how far Skinner could be pushed.

Skinner turned his television on to catch the late news. Warmed by the wine he was almost asleep when some part of his brain registered the word "Potomac." He opened his eyes and sat up.

"And as we reported in our afternoon bulletin, the strange reptilian creature reported yesterday in the Potomac, has now been linked with a series of top secret military maneuvers. A small area has now been closed to the public and is being patrolled by the marines."

Skinner sat up straight, and reached for his phone, speed-dialling Mulder's cellphone number.

Mulder jumped as his cellphone rang out in the damp air. He fumbled for it with cold fingers. <Damn, I thought I turned the stupid thing off.>

"Hello?" He whispered cautiously, one eye on the flashlights from the marine patrol nearby.

"Mulder. It's Skinner." <Shit. What does he know?> "Where are you, Mulder?"

"What, right at this minute?" Mulder stalled, ducking back away from the flashlights as they turned in his direction.

"Yes, Mulder. Right at this moment in time."

<He sounds pissed!> "Um, I'm staking out that report of a reptile in the Potomac..." Mulder began.

"Don't lie to me, Mulder," Skinner said ominously. "You know there isn't any damn monster in that river. You're investigating top secret military activity - and if you get caught you'll be in deep shit. Now get yourself away from there, and over here."

"But, sir..."

"Now, Mulder. Move it. You've got two hours. If you're not here by then I'm coming to get you," Skinner snapped, severing the connection. Mulder made a face at the phone and, reluctantly, got to his feet.

"Just one question, Mulder," Skinner said, upon opening the door to the agent a couple of hours later. "When you gave me that 302 this afternoon, did you know that you were intending to investigate military operations or were you still under the impression that you were looking for some sort of dinosaur?"

"Uh..." Mulder weighed up the situation in his head, trying to decide whether a lie was safer than the truth.

"Think very carefully before you reply." Skinner slammed the door shut, and stood in front of his agent, looking him in the eye.

"I knew, sir." Mulder scuffed his sneakers along the carpet, hoping that he looked suitably chastened.

"So you submitted a 302 which was, to put it mildly, 'economical with the truth.'"

"It could have been a dinosaur, sir," Mulder reasoned. "Or at the very least a genetic mutation, like the flukeworm. I felt I should find out. I didn't want innocent members of the public being threatened by some sort of dangerous aquatic life form."

"Hmm." Skinner fixed him with a steady, assessing stare. "All right, Mulder. Because of your recent good behavior, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt on this one. However..." His stare turned into a glare. "You are not, under any circumstances, to investigate this any further. Do I make myself clear?"

It was Mulder's turn to glare now.

"Sir, with all due respect, I don't think..."

"Do-I-make-myself-clear?" Skinner interrupted.

<You're just hot air, Skinner. You won't actually do anything!> Mulder chewed on his lip, then nodded, giving a bright smile.

"Yes, sir. Hey, I've got better things to do with my life than hanging out in the wet and cold spying on a bunch of marines."

"Good," Skinner nodded. "I mean this, Mulder. This case is nothing to do with the FBI. You simply can't go around poking your nose into military affairs with impunity. I'm going to rescind that 302. You are forbidden to investigate this case. Now - it's late. I suggest you stay here this evening in the spare room. Tomorrow morning, you and I are going on a little outing."

"An outing, sir?"

"That's right, Mulder. An outing. There's a change of clothing in the closet. I'll see you in the morning. Good night." Skinner nodded curtly at the young agent, and went off to his own bedroom.

<Knew it! No trips over the nearest desk/table/chair to have something painful applied to my backside. Mac would have tanned my hide for lying about this!> Mulder made a face at Skinner's departing back.

Mulder had no intention of letting this one drop. He slipped into bed and got out the letter he had been sent anonymously through the post the previous morning and re-read it.

Dear Agent Mulder,

You don't know me, but I've heard about you. You might like to know that alien technology is being used in secret experiments. Scientists at a military base have been observed experimenting with an organic aquatic "smart" weapon, capable of thought and independent decision making, using alien genetic material. The current whereabouts of the weapon is unclear after an attempt was made to steal it three days ago. It's possible it's

been dumped in the Potomac.

Yours sincerely,

A Friend."

There was no way he was showing this letter to Skinner. He could just imagine what the response would be. Somehow, he would have to find a way of continuing with this investigation without making his boss suspicious.

"Where are we going?" Mulder asked, hovering by the car. Skinner had given him breakfast, and made friendly conversation over the morning paper, so he didn't think he was in any shit. If he could just convince Skinner that he intended to drop this case, then he could lie low for a couple of days, and go back to investigate further when his boss had dropped his guard.

"Never mind. Just get in." Skinner gave him a smile that sent shivers down Mulder's spine. "I had a visitor last night," Skinner said conversationally, as they drove.

"Yeah?" Mulder looked out of the window. If they were using alien DNA, then that would be his biggest break ever. He just needed to get his hands on some of that material, get Scully to analyze it, and...

"It was Mac." Skinner said.

"Hmm? That's nice." ...and then he'd have evidence, which was what he'd been looking for all these years. "What?" He twisted around to stare at his boss.

"Mac. Dr Macclesfield. Your old tutor?" Skinner was intrigued by Mulder's reaction. He was jumpy - like a man with a guilty conscience.

"Oh." Mulder turned this over furiously in his head.

"He was upset to have missed you." Skinner murmured.

"How upset?" Mulder inquired nervously.

"Just upset because he was looking forward to seeing you. He and I had an interesting chat..." Skinner let that hang ominously in the air.

"Oh." Mulder said again, flushing. <Damn, what sort of a game is Skinner playing? And what did Mac tell him?> Somehow he couldn't shake off a sensation of imminent danger.

Skinner pulled up outside a store displaying a variety of leather items in the window.

"What is this place? Shit, it's some sort of sex shop!" Mulder glanced over at Skinner. "Why have you brought me here?"

"It's all right, Mulder. I promise I don't want to have sex with you." Skinner cast an amused glance at the agent. He got out of the car, and beckoned Mulder to follow him into the shop. "Right, Mulder. Take as long as you like," Skinner said briskly. "Just go around, and pick out three items. Any three of your choice."

"What sort of items?" Mulder's eyes darted nervously to a set of leather handcuffs, and a ball gag.

"Disciplinary items, Mulder. It's your butt they'll be used on, so it's only fair you get to choose. You might like to make them as diverse as possible - that would give us a choice depending on the nature of the offense, and how severe the penalty should be."

"There's no need for this, sir," Mulder whispered, flushing furiously as the shop assistant gave them a bored glance. "You won't need to use anything on me. I told you. Have I screwed up once since...since...you know...what happened in Oxford?"

"No, Mulder, you haven't. But I feel we're at a crossroads in our relationship." Skinner put his hand on Mulder's shoulder, and guided him over to a display rack of paddles. "You want to go one way, and I want you to go another. Now I can't force you to choose my path, but I think it's only fair to remind you what the likely consequences of going the other way are. Now choose," he said firmly.

Mulder stared at the paddles glumly for several moments, casting surreptitious glances at Skinner from under his eyelashes. Skinner was over the other side of the shop, flicking through a magazine that featured a naked, big breasted woman on the front cover, with a bored expression on his face. <Is the guy made of stone, or what? He's reading a sex magazine and he looks bored?> Mulder forced his attention back to the paddles. They all looked unpleasant. Finally he selected one that was well made, with a sleek, black rubber surface, which at least wouldn't splinter upon contact with his backside. It was also the most expensive one there. <Fine. Skinner wants to put me through this humiliation, let him pay for it.> Mulder grinned slyly, wandering over to a display cabinet of straps. He chose a sturdy one, with a split down the middle, and an even more exorbitant price tag than the last. Finally, he found a selection of canes. <Well after years suffering at Mac's hands, at least you know something about these, Mulder.> He chose a springy one, which was also astronomically expensive for no reason that Mulder could understand - being four times the price of any of the others. <Huh. That'll teach you, Skinner!>

He took his selection of items over and dumped them at the checkout. Skinner looked up.

"Finished? Good." He got out his wallet, and watched as the shop assistant rang the items through the till.

"You've got good taste," the shop assistant murmured, winking at Mulder, as she picked up the cane. "This one is a "dragon" cane, made of a special sort of wood - dense but springy. That's why it's so expensive. It's just about the most painful cane you can find."

"Shit..." Mulder grabbed the cane back. "Look, I've changed my mind. I'll choose another one."

"Leave it." Skinner put a big hand around Mulder's wrist, making him drop the cane. "We'll save it for special occasions shall we, Mulder?" He smiled, nodding at the shop assistant to wrap the item and put it in a bag with the other instruments of discipline.

"Fine," Mulder fumed. "You want to have to pay that price for a stick of wood then go ahead."

"It's a price I'm happy to pay, Mulder," Skinner said, handing over a whole fistful of cash without blinking an eye at the high sum. "Just remember that I'm not going to be the only one paying a price if you choose to lie to me, or disobey me in future."

"You're wasting your money," Mulder shrugged. "There is no way, no way that any of those items are going anywhere near my butt."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Skinner said, with sincerity. "But that's down to you, Mulder. It's entirely out of my hands."

"You don't trust me!" Mulder accused. "I've done my best to make you trust me but you don't. All that stuff about being my friend, those scuba diving lessons, the basketball games...it was all crap, wasn't it?"

"Of course not."

"Don't fucking lie to me!" Mulder yelled. "I've had it with you, and Mac, and your little deal."

"Mulder, calm down. Just give me your word that you won't pursue this investigation any further and that'll be enough for me."

"Okay. I give you my word. Satisfied now?" Mulder had got himself worked up into a fury, and Skinner stood there, allowing the onslaught to wash over him. "I won't go near the goddamn Potomac. Cross my heart and hope to die. Is that enough for you?"

"Your word is always good enough for me," Skinner said quietly.

"Yeah, right! I don't need this kind of shit, Skinner. Fuck you." Mulder stormed out of the shop, slamming the door behind him.

"Looks like you might be needing these sooner than you thought, sir," the shop assistant murmured, handing Skinner the bag of implements.

There was no sign of Mulder outside. Skinner glanced around and waited in the car for half an hour, but Mulder didn't return. <So much for the show of strength, Walter. That didn't exactly go as planned, did it?> Warily, Skinner returned home, and dug out the card Mac had given him the previous evening.

"He's testing you," Mac told him. "I said he would, Walter. The truth is that he wants to investigate this Potomac mystery, and he's trying to make you into the bad guy, so that he can disregard your orders without feeling guilty."

"I thought it might be something like that," Skinner sighed. "Hell, Mac, I don't think I'm up to this, it's too complicated - he's too complicated. I think I might end up doing more harm than good. Maybe I should call this whole thing off..."

"Walter, please, don't. Hang in there." Mac sounded genuinely worried. "People have been running out on Mulder all his life and he doesn't deserve it. Part of the reason he's testing you is to see whether you really will be there for him, or whether you'll bail out at the first sign of trouble. He likes you and he respects you - even if he is behaving like a brat at the moment. You've warned him what to expect if he disobeys you, and now you must just give him the time and space to come to his own decisions."

"That's hard."

"Looking out for Mulder is never easy!" Mac laughed. "But I have every faith and confidence in you, Walter. I'm sure you'll do the right thing. You have an instinctive feel for dealing with Mulder. You should listen to those instincts. I'm sure they'll always prove to be good ones."

Mulder zipped up his wetsuit and pulled on his scuba mask, depositing his cellphone, gun, and ID behind a bush. He glanced at his watch. Nearly 10 p.m. Looking through his binoculars, he could see the marines patrolling the perimeter of the makeshift fence they had erected. There was a lot of helicopter activity going on out there tonight. <Something's clearly about to happen, and I damn well intend to witness it, whatever Assistant Director Stalin has to say about it!>

He sat down suddenly, overwhelmed by a sense of panic. <Damn you, Skinner. I'm not turning back because of you.> Images from the past couple of months rushed into his mind. For the first time in years, he had felt as if he belonged somewhere, as if someone cared about him. He recalled shooting hoops with the Assistant Director, being taken out to lunch by the other man. They'd discussed the Civil War, and the breadth of Skinner's knowledge on the subject had surprised Mulder. Mulder had pursued his interest the Civil War as a

minor hobby after the incident with Melissa and the Temple of the Seven Stars, but Skinner had been an aficionado for several years and he had lent Mulder some good books on the subject. He'd enjoyed Skinner's company, and his friendship. <You aren't exactly blessed with many friends, Mulder. And those you do have get pissed with you and disappear out of your life without so much as a goodbye. Skinner will do the same. Just as soon as he realizes what a nutcase you are. He won't want anything to do with you. Better by far to push him away now before he realizes. He won't come after you. When he realizes you've disobeyed him, he won't be able to backtrack out of this little arrangement fast enough, Mac or no Mac. So I get my freedom back, and he gets his life back.> Mulder nodded to himself, and checked the pressure gauge on his scuba equipment. <At least he taught you something useful. Scuba diving is definitely a skill you're going to need in this investigation!> Mulder strapped his oxygen tank to his back, and set off for the water's edge.

Skinner tried Mulder's cellphone several times, but it was switched off. Finally he decided to head over to the other man's apartment. There was no reply to his knock, so he used the key that Mulder had lent him to let himself in, but a quick glance was enough to convince him that Mulder wasn't there. It didn't take an Einstein to work out where Mulder had gone.

Skinner was about to leave, when a thought occurred to him. He went into Mulder's bedroom, where he knew the other man kept his scuba equipment, and searched through his closet. No sign of it. Skinner gave a weary sigh, his worst fears being confirmed. He walked back to his car grimly, then set off back to his apartment to pick up his own scuba equipment.

<You are going to be sorry you were ever born, Mulder. When I get my hands on you, I'm going to...> Skinner ran various scenarios through his mind. Whatever he did, it had to be effective enough to persuade Mulder that there was no way he would tolerate this sort of disobedience, no way he would ever run out on the other man, and equally, that there was no way that he was going to let Mulder run out on himself either.

Mulder was halfway across the makeshift compound, moving stealthily towards the silently parked helicopter at the far end, when the alarm went off and the floodlights came on. The dogs appeared out of nowhere, and he turned and fled back towards the water, but he wasn't fast enough. He felt a thud as a paw hit the small of his back, and he went down with the animal's teeth wrapped around his arm. A few seconds later, the dog was pulled off him, and a burly marine yanked him to his feet. Mulder swung his fist ineffectually, and tried to make a run for it, but the marine was too fast. He punched Mulder on the jaw, and the agent went down, cracking his head on concrete as he landed.

"Who are you?" The marine shone the flashlight into Mulder's eyes.

"Nobody," Mulder shrugged, feeling dizzy. He had no intention of telling them who he was or who he worked for. His mind started to race ahead. This one was big. Even Skinner wouldn't be able to haul his ass out of this one, even if he wanted to, which, after his behavior over the past couple of days, Mulder seriously doubted.

"Well, Mr. Nobody, you're under arrest."

The marine got hold of Mulder by the collar and started to pull him towards a makeshift hut next to the helicopter. Mulder wasn't quite sure what happened next. Suddenly the marine just seemed to fall down, then the dog did the same. Mulder's arm was seized by someone wearing a wetsuit, a black mask obscuring his features, and then he found himself being dragged back to the water.

"Where's your scuba equipment?" his rescuer asked.

"Here." Mulder located the oxygen tank and mask and secured them hurriedly, while the other diver did the same, and then they both lowered themselves back into the water and began their descent.

Mulder followed the other man, still not entirely sure what was going on. Somewhere behind them he heard shouting, and shots rang out. Mulder saw a bullet graze his rescuer's arm and the man clutched it briefly, before grabbing Mulder's shoulder and gesturing that they should go deeper. Mulder nodded. His head hurt, and his vision was blurry. He vaguely remembered Skinner warning him how important it was not to go scuba diving unless you felt 100% fit, and the next thing he knew everything went black. He regained consciousness to find himself being dragged out of the water, his mask ripped off, and his rescuer's hands pumping his chest.

"It's okay. I'm okay," he murmured weakly. "Just...cold..."

"We need to get you away from here. They'll have raised the alarm by now, " his rescuer told him tersely. "You also need urgent medical attention. Dammit Mulder, why are you always risking your life in these foolhardy quests of yours?" To Mulder's eternal surprise, the other man held him against his chest for a second in a tight embrace, his breath warming the back of Mulder's head. "None of us want to lose you. You're too valuable," the man murmured.

"Sir?" Mulder struggled to make out the other man's features beneath the mask. "Is that you, sir?"

"Of course it damn well is! Who else would swim two miles underwater to rescue your ungrateful ass? Now, can you walk?"

"I'll be fine."

Mulder tried to get up, but his muscles felt too stiff and frozen to work properly and he could barely stand. He fell back again, his whole body suffused by shivering. "My

cellphone...badge..." Mulder pointed at the bush where he'd left his ID, and Skinner swiftly retrieved them.

"Okay. Hold still." Skinner expertly stripped the wet suit off Mulder, leaving him dressed in shorts and a tee shirt, and then disappeared. He reappeared with a blanket a few moments later, and wrapped Mulder up in it tightly, swinging the other man up in his arms and carrying him back to his car. Mulder could feel blood running down the side of his face, and he stared at his boss blearily, trying to make sense of events. He was dumped in the front seat of the car, and Skinner got in beside him and drove off. Mulder could feel himself slipping in and out of consciousness throughout the journey, but his boss didn't say a word to him. They drew up outside the hospital, and the other man hauled him out of the car and carried him into the ER, bellowing loudly for attention and calling over a whole horde of doctors and nurses.

Mulder was released from hospital a few hours later, with five stitches in his head wound, a badly sprained ankle, and suffering from a mild case of concussion. Still Skinner hadn't spoken to him. He hadn't let Mulder out of his sight at the hospital, and Mulder hadn't dared to meet his boss's eye. <He's going to kill me. There's no point the doctors patching me up because he's gonna take me out of here and skin me alive. I'm dead.> Mulder glanced at Skinner mournfully, but his boss was too busy talking to the medical staff, and listening to the instructions for Mulder's medication to take any notice of his errant subordinate. It wasn't until after Mulder had been treated, that the young agent realized that Skinner hadn't mentioned his own wounded arm to anybody.

"Uh, sir..." Mulder pointed at the bloody gash in Skinner's sweatshirt. "You should have that looked at while we're here."

"It's a flesh wound," Skinner told him tersely. "It doesn't need looking at. I'll put something on it when I get home. Luckily it's my left arm," he added pointedly. Mulder winced and shut up.

Skinner helped Mulder to the car, and opened the door for him, then they set off.

"Uh, where are we going, sir?" Mulder asked after half an hour. "This isn't the way to Alexandria."

"We're going to Crystal City," Skinner replied.

"Why? I want to go home." Mulder fought off a growing sense of panic. Last time he had lost his temper with Skinner he'd gotten away with it. And he was injured - that had to count for something. He wasn't sure how far he could push Skinner before the other man lost his cool, but it might work. He might get out of this yet. Without Mac to push Skinner into anything more painful, his boss might just rant at him for a while, and put him on tape surveillance or some other jerk off assignment.

"Mulder, right now I'm not prepared to let you out of my sight," Skinner told him calmly. "You're coming home with me."

"Fine. But you're not going to lay a finger on me! I'm not some sort of parcel you can hand around. Mac had no right to just pass me over to you like I didn't have any say in the matter."

"Mulder, you did have a say in the matter as I recall. You were given a choice, and you opted for the punishment I handed out back in Oxford."

"Well I've changed my mind!" Mulder yelled. "That was just one incident anyway. I didn't realize I was letting myself in for a whole lifetime of this crap!"

"You're tired and ill. I refuse to have this argument with you right now," Skinner said evenly. "Now you're coming home with me, whether you like it or not. We can discuss the rest of this issue later."

"I fucking well want to discuss it now!" Mulder fumed.

"Well I don't." Skinner pulled up at the Crystal City parking lot, and helped Mulder out of the car and up to his apartment. "Bed." Skinner pointed in the direction of the spare room and Mulder stood there defiantly, glaring at him.

"I need to phone Scully. Let her know I'm okay," he protested.

"Agent Scully knew what you were planning?" Skinner asked, shocked.

"Well, no." Mulder admitted.

"Then she's probably fast asleep in bed, not worrying about you right now. If you call her just to tell her you've been shot at, and have a head wound and a sprained ankle, she'll spend the rest of the night lying awake getting stressed out. I'll call her tomorrow," Skinner said firmly. "Now, bed." He pointed again. Mulder scowled for a moment, clearly deciding how much further he dared push his tired and irate boss, before finally giving in and limping off to the bedroom.

When he had gone, Skinner exhaled a deep sigh and made straight for the phone. His brief conversation with Mac confirmed in his own mind what he had to do. How he responded to this crisis was pivotal to his relationship with Mulder. He had to reel him in, fast and hard, and show him exactly what the limits were, and how far Walter Sergei Skinner could be pushed.

Skinner opened the door to the spare room and looked in on Mulder's sleeping form.

"Dammit, kid. You look so innocent lying there. Nobody would know what a damn nuisance you are." Skinner stood beside the bed, looking down on the agent. He ran gentle fingers through Mulder's damp, tousled, blood-stained hair. "You and I will reach an understanding. Whatever it takes, and however hard it is. For both of us," he whispered, squaring his shoulders.

"Well." Mulder demanded angrily as soon as he set eyes on Skinner the following morning. "Where d'you want me? Bent over the table? Or the couch? I want to get this over with."

"All in good time, Mulder, all in good time." Skinner glanced at him urbanely, sipping on his coffee. Mulder noticed with a pang of guilt that his boss had a dressing on his left arm, just poking out from under his tee shirt. "Why don't you have breakfast first?"

"I don't want breakfast," Mulder snapped. "I want..."

"To be punished?" Skinner raised an eyebrow. "That's strange. I'd have thought it was the last thing you'd want to be honest."

"I just want it over with!" Mulder snarled. "We both know it's going to happen, and there's nothing I can do about it, so let's just get on with it shall we?"

"Last night you needed stitches to a head injury. I don't think you're in any fit state to be punished today. In fact, I think your doctor would have a few things to say to me if I laid a finger on you in this condition. So why don't you sit down and relax, Mulder and we can have a pleasant couple of days. I've brought some work home. You can watch TV, rest, get your strength back, and we can talk about your punishment when you're recovered."

"So I am going to be punished?" Mulder asked plaintively, limping after Skinner as he went into the kitchen to make his guest some toast.

"What do you think, Mulder?" Skinner asked patiently.

"I don't know." Mulder pouted, pouring himself some coffee and turning his back on his boss. Skinner sighed. This wasn't going to be easy.

Mulder sat on the couch wishing Skinner would be unkind to him. He hated it when Skinner was nice, and he hated having punishment hanging over him like this. Sometimes, he forgot he was sulking, and Skinner would skilfully draw him into a conversation that he didn't want to have. Before he knew it he would find himself talking animatedly, until he remembered why he was here, and what lay in store for him, and then he shut up. <How can you just sit there, being nice to me, when you know that you're just waiting to tan my hide? You must be as angry as hell, so what's with the nice guy routine?>

He still hadn't figured it out a couple of days later, when, after dinner, Skinner cleared away the dishes, and got out a pad, which he handed to Mulder.

"What's this?" Mulder asked, glancing at his boss.

"It's yours." Skinner handed him a pen and a ruler. "I want you to draw some lines on the

front. Like this."

Mulder did as he was told, mystified.

"Okay, now I want you to write your name on it. In capitals. FOX WILLIAM MULDER. That's right. Between the lines we've drawn so that they're the same size," Skinner nodded. Mulder glared at his boss. This was ridiculous. It looked like some kid's school exercise book. "Okay," Skinner said, thoughtfully. "Now I want you to write "PUNISHMENT BOOK" underneath that."

"What?" Mulder demanded in a horrified tone.

"Do it, Mulder. Now." Skinner barked. Mulder jumped. Skinner had been so calm and kind the past few days, and in fact for several months now, that he'd forgotten how scary that tone of command could be.

"Okay, okay. Jeez." Mulder muttered under his breath, flushing with the humiliation of having to write the words Skinner had dictated to him.

"Show me." Skinner inspected Mulder's handiwork, while Mulder flushed an even deeper shade of red. "Okay," Skinner nodded. "Open the book up and write down today's date." Mulder took a deep breath and did as he was told. <I'll run with this for a while, Skinner, just to see where it ends up.>

"Now." Skinner sat back and folded his arms. "We're going to go through every single misdemeanor you've committed since you filed that 302 in my office the other day, and then we're going to work out a punishment for each and every one of them."

"No." Mulder said the word without meaning to. Skinner raised an eyebrow. "I'm not...I mean, that is...you can't do this to me," Mulder wailed.

"Yes I can, Mulder," Skinner told him firmly. "We've gotten along pretty well over the past few months haven't we? Well?" He demanded when no answer was forthcoming.

"I suppose," Mulder muttered resentfully.

"Well, Mulder - I'm going to be there for you when things are fine, and I'm going to be there for you when they're not. And I sure as hell am going to be there for you when you screw up. Like a few days ago, when I hauled your ass out of a situation that could have landed you in jail, instead of the hospital!"

Mulder recognized the truth of what Skinner was saying, but couldn't bring himself to agree with his boss. He just stared miserably at the punishment book.

"You see, Mulder. There is no way out of this. For either of us," Skinner said softly. "Me giving up on you is not an option."

"It's not?" Mulder looked up at his boss, wondering why that simple statement made him feel as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"No. It's not. No matter how painful it is getting that message into that thick skull of yours," Skinner grinned. "Now, let's get started. Before you start writing, I want you to go to your room, and get me the items in the bag in the closet. Bring them out here," he ordered.

Mulder weighed it up, wanting to be defiant, but not quite daring. Finally, thinking rebellious thoughts, he got up and limped back into his bedroom, getting the cane, strap and paddle out of the closet, and trying to ignore the usual pre-punishment sinking feeling that was starting in the pit his stomach.

"Sometime before the next millennium would be nice, Mulder." Skinner called from the other room.

<Yeah, yeah, right. I hate you, Skinner.> He limped back into the other room and threw the items at his boss. Skinner caught them, and put each of them on the table, in a row. Mulder's stomach lurched to see them all lined up in front of him.

"Now sit down, and start writing," Skinner said.

Mulder sat down and picked up the pen with a sigh.

"We'll begin with the lie you told me about the 302," Skinner told him, nodding that he should write it down.

"But you said we could pass on that. You said it was being 'economical with the truth' and you'd let it go. It wasn't a proper lie," Mulder protested.

"I was happy to let it go, while I thought you were being straight with me, Mulder," Skinner stated. "But subsequent events proved you weren't so now I'm bringing it up again. Write it down."

Mulder gritted his teeth and wrote: "Lied about 302" in the book.

"Good. Now write 'twenty' next to it," Skinner instructed.

"Twenty what?" Mulder questioned.

"Guess."

"Oh." Mulder glared at his boss and did as he was told.

"Now, what comes next?" Skinner asked.

"I don't know." Mulder chewed the end of the pen off and liberated a fair amount of blue ink onto his tongue. "Ugh." He tried to dab it off with the sleeve of his shirt. Skinner sighed

and lent him his handkerchief.

"Let's try again, Mulder," he said patiently. "But I want you to remember that at the end of this I'm handing out strokes for attitude. And if you keep going like this, you'll just keep raising that tally."

"All right. I'm thinking." Mulder wiped some ink off his fingers. "I suppose next would be investigating the case knowing it wasn't an X File?"

"No, that wouldn't be next." Skinner folded his arms.

"It wouldn't?" Mulder thought frantically. "Well what the hell else did I do?"

Skinner reached over and tore a blank page from the middle of Mulder's punishment book, then he went and got a pen for himself. He put a mark on the paper.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mulder asked.

"I'm just going to put one of these down every time you get mouthy, to remind myself," Skinner said calmly. "Now, have you thought about what's next?"

"Uh. I can't think of anything between the 302 and going out to the river," Mulder shook his head.

"How about not showing up for dinner with Mac?" Skinner asked.

"Mac ratted on me?" Mulder demanded hotly.

"No. As a matter of fact he was kind enough to play down the incident, but I figure a man doesn't come all the way to DC and turn up at someone's apartment if he thinks they won't be in. You had an arrangement to meet Mac for dinner, and you ditched him, Mulder. Pure and simple."

"I..." Mulder bit his lip, feeling guilty. <Damn Skinner. How did he work that one out!>
"Okay," he said with a sigh. He wrote "Ditched Mac" in the book.

"How much for a ditching, Mulder?" Skinner asked.

"Ten?" Mulder suggested hopefully.

Skinner raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps I should explain the rules a bit more clearly," he said. "Every time I ask you how many, I expect you to give me an honest reply as to how many you think you deserve. If you aim deliberately low, then I'll tell you how many I think you deserve, and we'll add your sum on top of that, as a punishment for being too lenient on yourself. All right?"

"Yes, sir." Mulder stared at his boss in surprise. Skinner was being firmer, more

uncompromising than Mulder would ever have imagined. "Um, thirty for ditching Mac then?"

"I think that's about right," Skinner nodded. Mulder wrote the sum down glumly. They'd only covered two of his offenses, and they weren't even his worst ones, and he was already due fifty strokes. <I'm not even gonna be able to stand after this, let alone sit!>

"Next?" Skinner asked.

"Losing my temper and mouthing off at you at that...store." Mulder mumbled, glancing at the cane, strap and paddle as they sat there in judgement on him. <Just waiting for your moment, aren't you!>

"Okay. I think thirty for that as well," Skinner said, nodding that Mulder should write it down. "I really don't like being sworn at like that, Mulder."

"No, sir," Mulder said miserably, writing "Mouthed off at Skinner" in the book.

"And put a star by it," Skinner added.

"Why?" Mulder asked, doing as he as told anyway.

"Because I seem to recall that we save a special area for mouthy comments. I want to make sure that I remember that when I come to deliver this," Skinner said. Mulder winced, remembering how much more painful it was to receive a swat on the back of his thighs than his butt. <And Skinner expects me to be able to cope with thirty swats there? No way!>

"Right. What next?" Skinner asked.

"Disobeying your orders and going back to investigate?" Mulder suggested.

"Before that?" Skinner tapped his fingers impatiently on the table.

"Oh. Ditching you at the store," Mulder sighed.

"That's right. How many for ditching me?"

"Thirty?" Mulder scanned back to the punishment for ditching Mac and decided on the same number.

"Okay," Skinner nodded. "Write it down. Now, let's get to the Potomac incident. How many do you think for that?"

Mulder thought about it for a long while.

"Well..." he began tentatively. "I suppose disobeying your orders was pretty bad...so...fifty?"

"Okay," Skinner nodded. "I'll accept fifty."

Mulder heaved a sigh of relief and wrote it down.

"And for risking your life?" Skinner asked.

"What? I mean...I thought...that is I thought the fifty covered the whole incident!" Mulder protested.

"Well it doesn't. It covers disobeying my orders, which was a small part of that incident," Skinner retorted. "Risking your life, Mulder. How many for that?"

"I don't know," Mulder sulked. "Ten?"

Skinner stared at him and a silence fell on the room.

"What? What have I done? What did I say?" Mulder demanded. "Ten's fair isn't it? I mean it didn't upset anyone else. It didn't affect anyone but me."

"Do you really think that?" Skinner shook his head, and got up, pacing around the room, running a hand over his scalp as he struggled with this latest example of Mulder's strange thinking. <Does he really place so little value on his own life? And does he honestly believe that this only affects him? Doesn't the idiot realize that people care about him? What about me, or Mac, or his mom, or Scully? Doesn't he have any idea about all of us and how we might feel if something happened to him?>

"What did I do wrong? Tell me?" Mulder babbled, wondering why Skinner was behaving so strangely.

"Write it down in the book, Mulder," Skinner said softly, coming to stand opposite the agent and leaning on the back of a chair. "Write down 'risked my life in a stupid and reckless fashion' and next to it, I want you to put down 100 + 10 for guessing so absurdly low."

"One hundred?" Mulder repeated in disbelief. "A hundred? And you're worried about me risking my goddamn life? I won't have a life to risk after you've finished with me!"

Skinner fought to regain control of his temper, then returned to his seat and made another mark on his pad. Mulder stared at him, speechless, then turned back to the pad, and wrote the words that Skinner had dictated to him.

"One fucking hundred, as instructed. Sir!" he spat. Skinner made another mark on his pad.

"Thank you, Mulder," he said mildly. "Next?"

"Fighting with that marine. After all I expect you macho marines like to stick together," Mulder snapped.

"Each of these marks represents ten strokes on the area we save for mouthy comments, Mulder," Skinner warned, making another mark on the piece of paper in front of him. "Now you can keep going like this if you want, but I really wouldn't recommend it. And as for the marine, no, I think you'd have been stupid not to put up a fight in the circumstances. I won't punish you for that. What next?"

"Breaking into government property?" Mulder offered, filled with dismay at the prospect of a further forty swats on his thighs in addition to the thirty he already had written down.

"Okay. Write down twenty. Next?"

"Mouthing off at you after the hospital," Mulder whispered glumly. "Thirty."

"No, we'll call that ten. You were injured, Mulder. I'm prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt on that one," Skinner smiled. "Write it down, then add them all up for me."

Mulder did as instructed, then buried his face in the punishment book and put his hands over his head.

"Mulder? How many does that total?" Skinner asked.

"Thrundrenfotty," Mulder whimpered.

"I can't hear you."

Mulder sat up, a pained expression on his face. "Three hundred and forty," he said, reaching into his jacket for his gun and passing it to Skinner. "Kill me now. Please, sir," he beseeched. "I'm never going to get through this."

"Don't worry about that, Mulder," Skinner smiled.

"You're going to let me off?" Mulder asked hopefully.

"No. I'm going to space them out," Skinner told him. "Let me explain how it's going to be, Mulder. I'm disappointed in you, son," he said, looking straight at the young agent. "You've let me down, you've let Mac down, and you've let yourself down. I feel as if I can't trust you any more. I certainly can't trust you to be out of my sight for a second. You've made that very clear. So, I'm not letting you out of my sight for the next two weeks. We're due back at work tomorrow but you won't be returning to your office. I've reassigned Agent Scully to Quantico for the next couple of weeks, so you don't need to worry about her. She seemed rather pleased with the assignment as a matter of fact, so it looks as if your punishment will be her vacation."

Mulder's eyes flashed with a sort of guilty sadness that made Skinner feel momentarily sorry for the other man. <When will Mulder ever sort out his feelings for Agent Scully?>

"What will I be doing then?" Mulder asked sulkily. "While Scully's partying at Quantico?"

"You'll be sitting in my office, with me. And you'll come home here after work, in my car, with me. You'll sleep in the spare room, and the only time you'll have any privacy is when you're asleep, or in the bathroom. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir." Mulder closed his eyes. He was right. His life was over.

"Mulder." The young agent felt Skinner's hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes in surprise. "I'm not trying to break your spirit, son. I just want you to understand where the boundaries are," Skinner said softly.

"Yes, sir." Mulder chewed on his lip. "Sir?"

"Yes, Mulder?"

"What about the...uh...?" Mulder glanced at the punishment book.

"I'm not going to deliver all of these in one go if that's what you're thinking," Skinner told him. "You're only human, Mulder and trust me, I'm no kind of sadist. Another reason why I want to keep you in sight for the next two weeks, is so that we can work our way through this list." His tone suddenly became brisk, and he picked up the strap. "Take this, Mulder. I want you to carry it to work, and keep it with you at all times. When I ask for it, I want you to produce it quickly, without argument, and then to get your pants down and prepare for punishment."

"At work, sir?" Mulder asked, aghast.

"At work, at home, in the car, anywhere," Skinner told him. "I don't know when I might decide to tick a few of these off," he gestured with his hand at the book. "Some days I might go hard on you, and at other times I might choose not to give you any licks at all. That's for me to decide. You've made enough decisions over the past few days, I think. Most of 'em bad. Now you'll just have to sit back and let me take charge."

"Yes, sir." Mulder was still reeling from the shock of learning how long and unpleasant this punishment would be.

"One more thing - write in those extra forty you earned mouthing off at me," Skinner nodded with his head. "And don't forget the asterisk. I want you to keep that book on you at all times as well."

"No, sir." Mulder bent his head to the task obediently, his hand shaking slightly as he wrote. <Two weeks! I'm never going to get through this. First chance I have, I'm going to ditch Skinner, take some vacation time, maybe go back to England for a few weeks. Mac would never have done this...>

"And, Mulder." Skinner seemed to read his thoughts. "If you try and ditch me during these two weeks, I promise that I'll come after you, bring you back, and we'll add another week to

your punishment and another fifty to that book for it. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Mulder nodded.

"Good. Now, I'm aware of your sprained ankle, so I won't ask you to bend over the table. Instead, I want you to go to your room, take your pants and shorts down, and lie face down on the bed and wait for me. I'm going to start off with the one hundred and ten you earned for risking your life, because I view that as the most serious offense on this list. I'm going to space them out - you'll receive them in batches of ten, every evening before you go to bed. That's over and above any other punishment you've received during the day, Mulder."

"Yes, sir." Mulder got to his feet, and hobbled towards the bedroom, his stomach flipping over in horror at the thought of the ordeal ahead.

"And Mulder?"

Mulder turned around. "Sir?"

"As this is such a serious matter, I'll be using the cane for these," Skinner told him tersely. Mulder swallowed and nodded.

He went into the bedroom, and lay down on the bed as instructed, his pants and shorts around his ankles. <God I hate this. I feel so stupid, lying here with my ass in the air, waiting for him to come in here and...> Mulder got hold of the pillow and buried his head under it. A few seconds later he heard Skinner come into the room, and his whole body tensed. He heard Skinner position himself next to him, and then the cane touched his butt for a second, as the other man took aim. Mulder stuck the pillow in his mouth and waited.

"Do you have any idea why your punishment for this particular offense is so severe?" Skinner asked him, delivering the first stroke. Mulder's whole body quivered as the cane made contact with his bare backside.

"Shit...no...I...shit..."

Skinner gave him three more swats, then waited.

"Mulder - I asked you a question."

"I...I don't know. I didn't think it was important. I thought you were pissed because of the way I talked to you, and because I lied and ditched you and Mac, and..." Mulder's voice trailed off into a muffled sob, as Skinner delivered another 3 swats, before pausing again.

"I am annoyed about those actions as well, Mulder. But you still haven't answered my question," Skinner told him.

"I...unnnnhhhh." Mulder yelped as the cane bit into his flesh again. <The woman in that shop was right. This cane is agony.>

"Nine, ten," Skinner counted, whacking down the last of the swats. "All right, Mulder. I've finished for now. Okay?" Skinner's hand briefly touched Mulder's hair before he disappeared into the other room.

Mulder waited until the other man had gone, then allowed himself the comfort of silent tears. He felt he should get up and, pull his clothing up, but he felt too tired and drained, so he just lay there, his wetted backside exposed to the world. After a while, worn out by the events of the past few days, he fell asleep. Skinner looked in on him half an hour later and shook his head, smiling slightly to himself. He hadn't gotten a satisfactory answer to his question, but he could wait.

"We have plenty of time, Mulder," he said, pulling a sheet over Mulder and gazing down fondly on the other man. <Two weeks to be precise. How the hell are you both going to get through this, Walter?> He turned away with a sigh. Like it or not, he'd chosen to take this path, and he had to get through it. Somehow he knew it was important that he deliver exactly what he had promised.

Mulder sat in the car, staring sulkily out of the window. His butt hurt, he was still feeling tired and drained, and he was dreading the next two weeks. He resisted all Skinner's efforts at small talk, grunting a reply in a monosyllabic, bored tone, until Skinner gave up with a sigh. <You can make me go through this, but you can't make me pretend to like it, Skinner!> When they drew up in the parking lot beneath the Hoover Building, Mulder got out gingerly, not sure which part of his body hurt most, his butt or his ankle.

"Mulder, do you have that strap?" Skinner asked, locking the car door.

"Yes. Why?" Mulder questioned nervously.

"Give it to me." Skinner held out his hand.

"You're not going to...here? Someone might...?" Mulder looked around in desperation. It was only just after 7 am, and the parking lot was deserted, but even so, he couldn't believe that Skinner intended to deliver some of his punishment here.

"Last night I told you that when I asked for the strap, I expect to be handed it without argument, and that you were to prepare yourself for punishment," Skinner told him sternly. "Is it possible that you've forgotten that already, Mulder?"

"No, sir." Mulder shot his superior a look of total hatred, and reached into the inside of his jacket, where he had placed the strap. He got it out and practically threw it to Skinner, then, glancing around anxiously, he undid his pants and pushed them down to his knees along with his boxers.

"Over the hood." Skinner gestured with his head, and Mulder clenched his teeth and bent over the car, balancing his sprained ankle on the wheel so it didn't take any of his weight. He was barely in position when the strap stung his bare thighs.

"Ow! Fuck..." Mulder tried to hop, unsuccessfully.

"Seeing as your attitude is so bad this morning, I thought we should make some inroads into the strokes we awarded for "mouthy" comments," Skinner told him, delivering nine more swats in quick succession to the tops of Mulder's thighs. Mulder bit down hard on his lip to stop himself making too much noise in case anyone should walk by. Then it was over, and Skinner helped him up, waiting until he'd righted his clothing before he handed him back the strap. "Next time just do as I say. Quickly, and without fuss," Skinner said tersely. "Now come on. I've got a lot of work to get through today."

When they reached Skinner's office, the older man took his coat off and hung it up, gesturing for Mulder to do the same. Then he seated himself behind his desk and held out his hand.

"The punishment book. You did bring it, Mulder?"

"No. I...uh..." Mulder flushed. <I remembered the damn strap for god's sake. Who cares if I forgot the stupid punishment book!>

"Not a very good start," Skinner sat back in his chair and regarded Mulder for a long while. "How can I cross off the number of strokes you've been given if you don't carry it with you?" Mulder made no reply. He just glared at his boss. "All right. I'll be lenient this time, and allow those strokes to be subtracted this evening. But if you forget it again, then any licks I give you during the day won't count against your total."

"You're really getting off on this aren't you?" Mulder snarled. "What is it with you and power trips, Skinner? You're some sort of goddamn control freak..."

"Mulder, I'd think very carefully about what comes out of your mouth next," Skinner interrupted. "You're already facing a very painful two weeks. Don't make that any worse."

"I..." Mulder made a conscious effort to rein back his temper.

"Good. Now, I have a lot of work to do. You can sit over here." Skinner pulled a chair over to the wall and placed it facing it.

"What?" Mulder stood there staring at it in disbelief.

"Hurry up, Mulder," Skinner gestured to the chair.

"You want me to sit facing the wall?" Mulder asked incredulously.

"Yes I do. And I want you to keep quiet," Skinner informed him. "You should count yourself lucky, Mulder. I'm giving you a chair. As soon as that ankle is healed, you'll spend your days standing."

"What?" Mulder was aghast. "You expect me to stand here, facing the wall, all day, every day, for two weeks?"

"Not all day, Mulder." Skinner put a hand on the agent's shoulder and sat him down firmly in the chair, ignoring Mulder's yelp of discomfort as his painful thighs made contact with the upholstery. "It would look a bit strange during meetings."

"So what do I get to do during meetings? Kneel at your feet?" Mulder asked recklessly.

"No. You get to sit down and observe. Oh, and I'll want you to listen very carefully to everything I say during meetings - afterwards I'll be testing that eidetic memory of yours."

"You want me to take notes?" Mulder asked. "Maybe do some shorthand as well?" he goaded. <What am I? His fucking secretary?>

"No, I don't want you to take notes," Skinner said. "I want you to listen. Afterwards I'll expect a verbatim summing up of the main points I make just to be sure you were concentrating."

Mulder stared at his boss in open-mouthed amazement. This just went on getting worse and worse.

"Two days of bad behavior. Two weeks of hell. Was it really worth it?" Skinner commented, closing Mulder's mouth with his finger. Mulder ducked his head down sullenly, and stared resolutely at the wall. <I'm not your puppet, Skinner! You can't control what I goddamn think! There is no way, NO WAY, that you are going to make me admit I did anything wrong. If you're looking for repentance, try the nearest church. I'm not playing ball!> He crossed his arms and descended once more into a sulk.

Skinner ignored him, returning to his desk to start work. <All right, Mulder, we can play it your way. You sulk, and you won't get offered coffee. I bet I can hold out longer than you can.>

By ten O'clock Mulder was bored and restive. By eleven he had taken to reciting the entire works of "Doctor Seuss" in his head. This took him through to lunch at 12:30, when, mercifully, Skinner broke the silence.

"I'll have Kim bring us some sandwiches. After taking a couple of days off to look after you, I have a lot of work to get through," he said meaningfully. "I don't have time to stop for anything more substantial. What kind of sandwich do you want?"

"As long as it's not green eggs and ham, I don't care," Mulder shrugged. Skinner raised an eyebrow. "I do not like green eggs and ham, I do not like them Sam I am," Mulder recited in

sing song fashion.

Skinner shook his head. "Well at least you're not going to be eating in a box, with a fox," he said pointedly, glancing around the four walls of his office with a grim smile.

"Ha, ha! Very funny," Mulder muttered under his breath, as Skinner left the office to place his lunch order with Kim.

"While we're waiting for her to come back," the Assistant Director said, upon his return, "I think we might as well clear another few licks from that ledger, Mulder. Give me the strap." He held out his hand and Mulder sighed and pulled the strap from his jacket, getting to his feet and undoing his trousers wearily. "The desk's full up with papers. I suggest this chair." Skinner pointed to a black leather armchair. "Quickly, Mulder. Unless you want witnesses. Kim will be back soon." Mulder hastily bent over the armchair, and closed his eyes.

"Ten more off your "mouthy" list." Skinner informed him, swinging the strap down on Mulder's already smarting thighs. <Damn my stupid mouth. And damn you, Skinner, for delivering these all in the same place. God, I'd welcome swats on my ass right now! Anywhere but on my goddamn thighs.>

Skinner finished the strokes and handed the strap back to Mulder.

"You can sit down again," he nodded at the armchair. "You can use that during lunch. We wouldn't want Kim wondering why my brightest agent is sitting facing the wall, would we?" he murmured. A few minutes later Kim entered with the sandwiches which Mulder devoured greedily. <It's amazing how easy it is to become obsessed by food when you've spent all morning staring at a wall.>

"I have a budget meeting this afternoon," Skinner informed Mulder after lunch. "Can I trust you to sit quietly throughout?"

"Yes. Sir." Mulder rolled his eyes.

"Good."

The budget meeting ranked among the most boring three hours Mulder had ever spent in his entire life. <Damn, how does Skinner concentrate on all this stuff?> Mulder watched as spreadsheets were pored over, each department's accounts were analyzed, and the last cent accounted for.

"Your department is over budget again, Walter," one of the other Assistant Directors observed.

"I'm aware of that, Tom," Skinner sat back in his chair, tapping his pencil on his pad. "We had some unforeseen expenses crop up."

"Yeah, you might call them X-tra expenses." Tom Reed shot a glance in Mulder's direction.

Mulder looked at the balance sheets, and profit and loss accounts, and saw "X Files" highlighted in red.

"That's not..." He opened his mouth without meaning too.

"Mulder." Skinner interrupted him with a glare and Mulder shut up, flushing furiously. "Tom, you and I both know that the X Files are a special case. Agent Mulder and Agent Scully do an excellent job and try to keep their department on budget, but the nature of their work makes it hard for them to keep their costs low."

Mulder listened in surprise as Skinner spent the next twenty minutes defending the X Files to the other Assistant Directors. He had no idea that Skinner got given such a hard time about the X Files, or that he argued so vehemently on Mulder's behalf. Mulder was almost touched by Skinner's vociferous support.

When the meeting was over, Skinner sat back down at his desk and beckoned Mulder to stand in front of it.

"Your report, Agent Mulder please," he requested, getting out his pen and continuing with his work. He took no notice of Mulder as the other man rambled through his verbal report, trying to remember everything that happened, and the order it happened in, picking out what he thought were the salient points.

"And then, you, uh, defended the X Files, and made the point that the work we do is unpredictable. And Assistant Director Brady made the point that all FBI work is unpredictable to a certain extent, and you pointed out that we could budget easily enough for many of the more mainstream departments, but the X Files might cover anything from genetic mutations to mass homicide, and therefore that it was hard to fix a budget and..." Mulder thought he might just as well have been reciting from a phone directory, as Skinner continued working, not looking at him once. Finally he finished and stood there waiting. Skinner looked up.

"Good. So it seems that you can listen to me if you try," Skinner commented. "And make sense of what I'm saying. You therefore presumably have no problem understanding the words: 'I forbid you to continue this investigation,' do you?"

"No," Mulder muttered, staring at his feet.

"So why did you ignore me when I gave you that order?" Skinner demanded.

"I...don't know," Mulder mumbled.

"Think, then, Mulder. I expect an answer to that question at some point in the next two weeks. And to that other question that I asked you last night."

Mulder looked up, his expression making it clear that he hoped Skinner had forgotten about that.

"Now, go and sit back down." Skinner nodded at Mulder's chair and Mulder stomped over there, and sat back down facing the wall with a resigned sigh.

Mulder was quite sure that this was the worst day of his entire life. He was grateful when Skinner finally decided to leave the office at 7 p.m.

"Time for a quick swim, then dinner," Skinner smiled, snapping his fingers at Mulder, and collecting both their coats, throwing Mulder's to him.

Mulder was convinced that Skinner only suggested the swim because of the way the chlorine stung on contact with sore flesh, turning one of his favorite activities into a torment. He was relieved when they reached the Italian restaurant, and he could at last relax. Skinner stopped being the stern taskmaster he had been all day, and Mulder actually started to unwind and enjoy himself. The food was excellent <And Skinner's paying!> and his boss engaged him in a conversation about the Civil War which Mulder found himself joining against his will. He even forgot that he was sulking and soon found himself talking non-stop, arguing some obscure point of little known Civil War lore which Skinner found fascinating. It therefore came as rude awakening, when, just as he was finishing his coffee, Skinner asked him for the strap.

"What, here? Now?" Mulder glanced around the restaurant.

"You can go and wait for me in the men's room," Skinner said, taking the strap.

"No." Mulder said stubbornly. "Someone might walk in."

"I'll lock the door," Skinner said smoothly.

"Someone might hear!" Mulder protested.

"You'd better be quiet then," Skinner informed him. "Now go, Mulder. Remember what I told you about arguing. And I want you ready and waiting when I come in there."

Mulder ground his teeth together, and got to his feet, shooting a look of pure venom at his boss who was finishing his coffee. The men's room was empty. Mulder undid his belt and pushed his trousers down, bending himself over a sink.

<If anyone but Skinner comes in now I will die of embarrassment> All the same he didn't dare disobey Skinner's last order. He seemed to be there for hours, his trousers and underwear around his ankles, his butt stuck in the air awaiting punishment, and his head resting in his arms in the sink. Finally he heard a noise and turned around quickly, prepared to pull his pants up, but he was relieved to see that it was only Skinner.

"Ten more off the mouthy list, Mulder." Skinner informed him, preparing to swing the strap.

"Please, sir...couldn't we drop that for tonight?" Mulder begged. "Couldn't we deal with

another offense, sir, and, uh, a different area of my body. Please?"

"All right." Skinner nodded. Mulder looked around in surprise. That had been easy!

"How about if I was to suggest dropping the punishment altogether?" he dared to ask.

"Don't push your luck," Skinner snorted, swinging the strap against Mulder's bare buttocks.

"We'll take ten off the tally you earned for ditching Mac. Count please, Mulder."

"What, out loud?" Mulder squealed as the strap hit his butt.

"Yes. Out loud." Skinner swung the strap again.

"Okay, okay! I'm counting! Two!"

Mulder descended back into a sulk as soon as the strapping was over. <Damn you, Skinner, for ruining the evening just as I was starting to enjoy myself. You just couldn't help yourself could you? I hate you.>

He stormed moodily into Skinner's apartment, threw himself down on the couch, and turned on the television, grabbing the remote control. Skinner turned the TV off, and stood in front of the couch.

"What? What now?" Mulder yelled, sitting up. "Can't I even watch TV in peace?"

"No, you can't. Bed time, Mulder," Skinner pointed at the spare room.

"It's ten O' clock!" Mulder protested. "I can't go to sleep at this hour!"

"Then you can lie awake counting sheep. Now get yourself ready for bed, and wait for me to come and give you tonight's ten strokes."

"You can't!" Mulder ground out. "I can't..." He wanted to say that he couldn't take it, but his pride got in the way. Skinner gave him a sympathetic look.

"Mulder, this is only day one. We have a long way to go. Now if you just accept, and do as you're told, then there's a chance, just a chance mind, that I might consider going easy on you towards the end of these two weeks."

"There is?" Mulder looked up. "You'd cross out some of those licks I wrote down in the punishment book?"

"No," Skinner shook his head. "But I might allow you to have something to read in the office, and to choose your own bedtime."

"Oh thanks," Mulder said sarcastically. "Thanks a bunch, sir." He got to his feet. "That's a real incentive."

"Talking of the punishment book, bring it over here," Skinner ordered.

"Why? What're you going to do?" Mulder stopped. He knew he was walking a tightrope here. He couldn't stop himself mouthing off at Skinner, but every time he did, he dreaded that Skinner would add to the tally in the book.

"I'm going to cross off the strokes I gave you today," Skinner told him mildly. "Now are you going to bring it over?"

Mulder did as he was told, slapping the book down into Skinner's hand and watching as his boss meticulously subtracted the strokes he had administered that day from the relevant columns. Then Skinner handed him back the book.

"Remember to carry it with you everywhere from now on, Mulder," he advised.

"Yes, sir." Mulder stuck it into his jacket, and walked stiffly towards his bedroom. The cane was resting on the dresser. <You've just been sitting there all day, waiting for me, haven't you!> He got undressed, stomping noisily around the room and throwing his clothing around then went to the bathroom. He half expected Skinner to be waiting for him when he returned but he wasn't. Mulder slid his shorts down and lay face down on the bed, clutching the pillow as he had done the previous night. <D'you get some kind of perverted thrill knowing I'm waiting here with my ass hanging out, Skinner?> He was surprised to feel a hand on his head what seemed like a few seconds later.

"Sorry to wake you, son. It seems I was right about sending you to bed though. You went out like a light," Skinner said to him. "I didn't want to wake you, but I figured you'd rather have these ten tonight than twenty tomorrow night."

"I'd rather not have any of them," Mulder muttered into his pillow.

"Sorry, Mulder, that's not an option." Skinner sighed as he took in Mulder's reddened backside. As he'd said earlier, this was only day one. <God give me strength. And please let him break before I do!> Skinner prayed fervently as he delivered the first stroke.

"Now, Mulder, I'm still waiting for an answer to that question I asked you last night. Why is the penalty for this particular offense so severe?"

"Because..." Mulder's head was reeling. He was tired, he just wanted to sleep. It had been a very long day. "Because..." Skinner delivered a couple more swats and Mulder buried his face in his pillow, giving up. He made no effort to answer the question during the rest of the caning, and finally Skinner gave up as well, delivering the last lick, and then turning out the lamp on the nightstand.

"Think about it, Mulder. I do expect an answer to this one," he murmured, his hand touching Mulder's head and stroking his hair lightly. "Let's hope tomorrow will be better than today, huh, kid?" Mulder didn't answer. He just buried his head under his pillow and allowed the

tears to wash silently down his face.

Skinner gave Mulder his first strapping before breakfast the following morning. He judged that Mulder's ankle was good enough to allow him to stand for the morning at the office, facing the wall, and allowed him to sit in on a short meeting in the afternoon. He delivered another strapping immediately upon their return to his apartment after work, and then ordered them take out. Mulder ate it sullenly, before retiring to bed. He was no further forward with an answer to Skinner's question when his boss delivered his third caning, and he refused to say a word as his already tortured butt received yet more punishment. Once again, he waited until Skinner had left his bedroom, before sobbing silently into his pillow.

For his part, Skinner was finding the whole experience to be as much of an ordeal as Mulder was. He sat in his chair, nursing a glass of whisky, before reaching for the telephone and calling Mac. He felt a lot better after that conversation. Mac seemed to know exactly what was going on in Mulder's head and was able to explain it all to him.

"It's hard on him, and it's hard on you," Mac sighed. "But you're both still there, hanging in. So I don't think he wants to give up on himself, or on you. Please don't give up on him."

"I won't. I just never realized..." Skinner paused, pressing the whisky glass against his head. He felt wrecked - emotionally and physically exhausted by this battle of wills.

"I know. Mulder's a hard nut to crack. But I'm sure you'll find a way of reaching him, Walter. You're not doing anything wrong. And despite what I'm sure he's thinking, you're not being any harder on him than I ever was. He needs a display of strength now, while he's testing you. Once he knows that you're strong enough to take all the shit he can throw at you, if you'll pardon my French, he'll come round. I promise you."

"Okay," Skinner sighed. "But hell, Mac, it'd better be worth all this. I feel like I'm some kind of monster right now."

"Nonsense!" Mac laughed. "Everything will be fine, Walter. Just give it time - and don't, whatever you do, cave in."

"Hell, I'm a Skinner. The word "quit" isn't in our vocabulary." Skinner gave a wry, strained smile.

After two more days of Mulder's sullen company, Skinner was at the end of his tether. As he delivered his fifth caning, on Mulder's now reddened backside, he decided that they both needed a break.

"Tomorrow's Saturday," he said to Mulder's unresponsive back. "No punishment tomorrow, Mulder. We'll take a day off, go out, catch a game maybe..."

"Great. I get to spend the day sitting on a hard wooden bench," Mulder muttered into his pillow.

"Okay. Thoughtless of me," Skinner shrugged. "I'll think up something else."

"Why bother?" Mulder murmured.

"Because I think we both deserve it," Skinner replied tersely. "And maybe a day off will clear the fog from your mind, and give you the answer to that question I asked you. "

"Both of them," Mulder muttered.

"What?"

"Both questions." Mulder raised his head. "You want to know why my punishment for risking my lousy goddamn worthless life is so severe, and you want to know why I disobeyed you. I haven't give you an answer to either question yet."

"I'm glad to see you're paying attention," Skinner chuckled. "And I look forward to hearing what you come up with."

"Don't hold your breath," Mulder muttered as Skinner left the room.

"Ballooning?" Mulder stared at his boss dubiously as they drew up beside a field with an enormous hot air balloon lying in it. "You want me to float through the air in a basket?"

"You'll love it," Skinner grinned. "It's a fantastic sensation - and you get to stand up."

"Oh. Right. Great," Mulder sniffed moodily but his depression lifted as he was whisked across the sky, and he turned to Skinner with a dazed smile on his face. "This is...beautiful..." he whispered, staring down at the earth a long way beneath. "So peaceful."

He shut his eyes, and allowed the breeze to ruffle his hair. Like this he felt truly free. He could forget his sore, aching butt, and he could forget all his other problems. Up here, he was like a bird, just floating, coasting along on outstretched wings. He could almost forgive Skinner everything for arranging this experience for him.

He forgot that he was sulking, and chatted amiably to Skinner all day, laughing and joking like a kid. His mood changed as soon as they returned to the apartment. Tomorrow would dawn soon enough, and then things would be back the way they were. Skinner would want a piece of his butt, and he'd spend all day staring at the wall. Mulder took himself off to bed early, relieved to have escaped the nightly caning ritual, and lay there on his stomach thinking to himself. He heard Skinner go to bed, and waited for half an hour until everything was quiet. Then, without even thinking about it, he got up, and let himself out of the apartment.

Mulder wasn't sure how long he walked for. Three or four hours maybe, just churning over stuff in his mind, going around in the usual endless circles. And still it all ended up with Skinner. He couldn't get away from it. Unless he resigned, he was stuck with his boss. There was simply no way out. And the truth was, that deep inside he didn't want a way out - he just wasn't ready to admit that to himself yet. He remembered the way Skinner had pulled him out of the water a week ago and hugged him for a moment. Why? <Why the hell do you care, Skinner? Why risk your life saving my butt just so you could spend the next two weeks torturing it?> He scuffed his shoes along the pavement, and then looked up in surprise. Without even realizing it, his footsteps had taken him back to his boss's Crystal City apartment. With a sigh, he got into the elevator, then walked reluctantly along the corridor to his boss's apartment...and then froze. Skinner hadn't given him a key. The only way he could go back in was if he knocked on the door and woke his boss up. <Oh shit.> Mulder crouched down gingerly outside the door and thought about it. Finally, after an hour, he got up, and bravely knocked on the door.

"Mulder? What the hell?" Skinner took in Mulder's pale, miserable face, and sighed.

"I...locked myself out," Mulder muttered.

"You were thinking of ditching me?" Skinner asked, letting the agent in and shutting the door behind him.

"I suppose," Mulder shrugged, glancing at his boss from under lowered eyelashes. "But I didn't. I came back. That has to count for something."

"It does, Mulder. I won't punish you for this," Skinner told him. Mulder heaved a sigh of relief.

"However, I clearly can't trust you to be alone for a second, so get your pillow and blanket and follow me."

Mulder did as he was told, following Skinner into the master bedroom. "You can sleep on the floor," Skinner pointed. "That should make it a lot harder for you to sneak out again."

Mulder sighed as he settled down on the floor. <You can't give me one break, can you, Skinner. Not one goddamn break!> He thought furiously to himself, but he was too tired to brood for long and soon fell into an exhausted sleep.

"Do you want to tell me what was going on in your head when you took off last night?" Skinner asked his sulky guest the following morning.

"No." Mulder stood leaning against the wall, eating his breakfast. Even after having yesterday "off" his butt still felt too painful to sit on.

"All right. We might as well get started then," Skinner held out his hand. "Bring me the book, Mulder."

Mulder did as he was told.

"Do you want the strap as well?" he asked sullenly.

"No."

"Not the cane?" Mulder couldn't hide the note of anxiety that had crept into his voice. The strap hurt bad enough, but the cane was truly unbearable.

"No." Skinner shook his head, glancing through the punishment book.

"Oh. I'll go and get the paddle then. That should make a change," Mulder pulled a face, and started walking into the spare room, but Skinner stopped him.

"There's no need, Mulder. Come back here."

"Why? Are you letting me off today as well?" Mulder asked hopefully.

"No, I'm not," Skinner sighed. "As a matter of fact, I think today is going to be hard on you, Mulder, but maybe not for the reasons you think. Now, I propose to clear the ledger of the fifty you earned for disobeying me. We'll do all fifty in one go."

"What?" Mulder backed away, a look of panic on his face. "Look, sir, my butt can't take much more of this. I don't think I can stand fifty..."

"You'll stand it, Mulder. And it shouldn't be quite as painful as the strap. I'm going to use my hand."

"What?" Mulder stood there, aghast.

"That's right. My hand, your bare butt. A time-honored, old-fashioned, over the knee spanking."

"No way." Mulder stood his ground, shaking his head resolutely.

"It's either my hand or the cane. Your call, Mulder." Skinner sat there, gazing at the younger man, watching the thought processes churn through his head.

"Over the knee?" Mulder paled.

"That's right," Skinner nodded. "Less painful, more humiliating."

Mulder continued shaking his head as he undid his jeans and carefully eased them over his painful backside.

"I hate you, you do know that don't you?" he whispered in a tortured tone, kneeling beside his boss.

"Right now, I'd have said it's pretty obvious," Skinner shrugged. "All right, Mulder, over you go." He hauled Mulder over his knee, and pushed his boxers down to reveal Mulder's blistered, neon pink bottom. He took a deep breath, and thought back to his conversation with Mac, trying to hang onto the reason why he was doing this. "Okay, Mulder. You might like to think about the answer to one of those questions while you're down there." He smacked the palm of his hand down firmly on Mulder's butt. Mulder jumped slightly, but Skinner held him firmly, keeping him in place. He went slowly, but even so, after fifteen swats Mulder was wriggling in his lap like a fish.

"Can't...can't...please...stop...just for a minute," he panted.

"All right." Skinner paused, and Mulder blinked.

"Why do you do that?" he asked. "It's like that night at the restaurant. Why do you take any notice of what I say? You don't have to."

"No, I know I don't," Skinner gently soothed the small of Mulder's back with his hand. "But I'm a reasonable man, Mulder, and I'll listen to reasonable requests. You should know that by now."

"I guess..." Mulder bit his lip. "I guess I do know that," he whispered.

"Good. Now do you have an answer to that question before I begin again? Why did you disobey me?"

"I...I don't know." Mulder muttered.

Skinner raised his hand and smacked down another swat. "Talk, Mulder," he said. "Just say the first thing that comes into your head."

"I...fuck...ow, owwww!" Skinner delivered two more blistering smacks. "I just wanted to investigate that's all...I thought it might be evidence...of...owwww extra-terrestrials....shit...unnnhhhh."

"That was worth risking your life for?" Skinner questioned.

"Ow! Yes! No! I don't know! I thought so at the time!"

"And was it worth risking the trust between you and me? The trust we'd built up over the past few months?" Skinner smacked down five more swats in quick succession and Mulder fought back the sobs.

"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know..." He clung to Skinner's knee, repeating the mantra over and over again, not even realizing when the spanking finished. Finally, Skinner disentangled him, then he went and got the distraught agent a glass of water. "When you do know, perhaps you'd care to share it with me," he said gently. "Now rest for a while."

We'll do some more later."

"No more, please..." Mulder muttered weakly.

"Mulder, we still have a lot to get through." Skinner pointed to the punishment book. "I told you today would be tough. Now I suggest you lie down on the couch for a couple of hours and watch a movie. After lunch we'll clear some more off this ledger."

Mulder could hardly eat his lunch. He just stood there, glowering at his boss. After lunch, Skinner sent him to get the paddle, then positioned him over the back of the couch.

"Fifteen on the butt, Mulder. We'll clear away the rest of your tally for ditching Mac." He delivered the fifteen at a blistering pace, until it was all Mulder could do to fight back the tears. Afterwards, Mulder got up, and began pulling up his jeans, hiccuping to himself.

"Leave that, Mulder," Skinner told him. "I want you to spend the next hour in the corner."

"With my pants down...?" Mulder gulped. "Like, on display?"

"That's right," Skinner nodded. "Maybe that will help you focus your thoughts on why you're in this humiliating position in the first place."

Mulder bit back his smart reply, and hobbled over to the corner, resting his forehead against the wall, horribly aware of the cool air wafting around his exposed buttocks. <I am so tired of this. I hate you, Skinner. Hate you, hate you, hate you...>

Mulder was exhausted by the evening. He wouldn't eat any dinner and just lay on the couch, his eyes drooping. Skinner touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Bed, Mulder. You're done in," he gestured to the stairs. "My room, on the floor, like last night," he ordered. Mulder eased himself off the couch. "Take the cane up with you. I'll be five minutes. You can bend over the end of the bed," Skinner commanded.

"No!" The words snapped out before Mulder could stop them.

"I'm sorry?" Skinner turned around and fixed Mulder with a stern glare.

"No! I'm not...I can't... My butt hurts too much. I can't take any more. You're always in my face! I've spent a week like this. I need some air. I need to...I need..." Mulder choked back the sobs, making for the door. Skinner stopped him.

"You're not walking out on me again, Mulder. You're staying here and taking what you deserve. And you're going to give me some answers," Skinner said firmly, grasping Mulder's arm, and pushing him towards the stairs.

"I'm not...I'm..." Mulder was still muttering incoherently as he took himself up the stairs, and slipped out of his jeans. He realized he'd forgotten to get the cane, but he couldn't bring

himself to go back downstairs to find it. Skinner appeared in the doorway a few minutes later, with the cane in his hand. "Please don't. Please," Mulder begged.

"You know the drill, Mulder. Bend over the bed." Skinner ignored the other man's protests, and manhandled him over the bed. "Do you have an answer for me yet, Mulder?" He asked, delivering the first swat.

"No!" Mulder yelled as the cane made contact with his flaming backside. He bit down on his lip, and held back the sobs only through a mighty act of will. <No way you're gonna see how much this hurts, Skinner!> Finally it was over, and he slipped off the end of the bed and slid under his blanket on the floor, waiting for Skinner to leave. Only he didn't. Instead the AD sat down on the bed, turned on the lamp, and began reading a book. Mulder wanted desperately to cry, as he cried every night after a caning, but not in front of Skinner. The tears streamed silently down his face, and finally he gave into them, his body shaking as great, convulsive sobs consumed him and he couldn't stay quiet any more.

"Mulder." He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Go away," he mumbled into his pillow.

"Mulder." Skinner turned him over, and gave him a handkerchief. "What's it all about, Mulder?" he asked, pushing the other man's tear stained hair away from his eyes, and hunkering down beside his agent, putting his arms around Mulder's shoulders. Mulder tried to pull away but Skinner was insistent, and Mulder found himself burying his face in Skinner's shoulder and sobbing for several long minutes. When he finally finished, Skinner pulled him up, took him down stairs and made him a plateful of toast, helping him to sit cautiously on the couch.

"You've hardly eaten all day," Skinner told him gently, sitting down next to him. Mulder nodded mutely, and took a mouthful. When he had eaten it all, he looked up into Skinner's questioning eyes with a sigh.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, pulling the blanket he was wrapped in tighter around his body.

"For what?" Skinner asked insistently.

"I did know the answers to your questions," Mulder chewed on his lip. "I disobeyed your orders because I...because I...wanted to see if you'd come after me," he whispered. "I wanted to know if you'd help me if I was in trouble, like Mac used to. And then when you did, I felt guilty, because you risked your life...and you didn't put that on the list, as if it wasn't important. You could have died...and it would have been my fault...and...you kept going on about my life being important, and that made me feel worse..." he stuttered. "If I got a hundred for risking my life, I ought to get double that for making you risk yours. They fired at us! You were shot...Shit if you'd been killed, if that bullet had..." He broke off, brushing more tears away angrily with his arm.

"Mulder, I made that decision to come after you. That wasn't your fault." Skinner shook his

head in disbelief. He had no idea that this was what had been going around in Mulder's head. "I can take responsibility for my own actions. I just wish that you could do the same," he said, hugging the other man tightly, and stroking his damp hair softly.

"I can. I do. I'm sorry." He blinked the tears out of his eyes, squeezing them tightly shut. "I wanted to say that days ago, but I was too angry."

"Angry with whom, Mulder?" Skinner inquired gently, holding the other man at arm's length and studying him keenly.

"Me," Mulder whispered. "I wanted to see Mac and I stood him up. Then when I heard you'd seen him, I felt angry with you, and angry with him as well. I don't know why Mac used to look out for me at Oxford, but then when he handed me over to you, I knew you didn't really want the responsibility. I could see it in your eyes. And I heard you talking to him on the phone. You wanted to get rid of me. I'm too much work," Mulder shook his head.

"Yeah. You sure are!" Skinner chuckled. "And you sure as hell like to make things difficult for yourself, don't you, Mulder?"

"I suppose so," Mulder managed a wry grin.

"But you're wrong about me not wanting the responsibility," Skinner's tone was serious now. "I've enjoyed your company over the past few months. I wouldn't want to lose that. I'm aware of the complications and problems that come with looking out for you, but trust me, I can more than handle them."

Mulder nodded, but his eyes showed that he was still doubtful.

"I mean it," Skinner said forcefully. "Now I'd prefer it if that responsibility just meant me taking an interest in you and your career, being around to listen to you, and advise you. I'd like to be a friend and mentor - someone you can lean on, and rely on, because I think you need that. But it's not a chore, Mulder - I like your company. If the other side of the coin means hauling your butt out of trouble, and handing out punishments, I can do that as well. You can't have one without the other. I told you before - I'm there for you every which way, and there is no crap you can hand out that is ever going to change that."

Mulder didn't answer. He stared down at his plate and bit on his lip. Skinner reached out and took hold of the other man's chin, forcing him to look up. The expression on Mulder's face filled him with hope for the future.

"It's been tough on both of us," Skinner sighed. "Do you want to know what I think about this past week?" he asked. Mulder raised his eyes heavenward.

"I bet you're gonna tell me anyway," he said.

"That's right!" Skinner grinned. "I think all this..." he waved his hand around the room, taking in the punishment book, and the paddle and strap that were still on the couch where

they had been left. "All this was a test. You were testing me, Mulder, To see if I was good enough to take over where Mac left off."

"Testing you?" Mulder glanced at Skinner in surprise.

"Yes. You were straining at the leash, Mulder, trying to see how much slack I'd give you. I hope you have your answer."

"Yeah. You're one mean son of a bitch!" Mulder grinned.

"I can be but that doesn't mean that I don't care. I do. Very much. If I didn't I wouldn't put either of us through this. Now, you need to get some rest, son. You still have ninety-five licks to be wiped out of that book."

"I'll be good from now on, I promise," Mulder said earnestly. "You could let me off those licks couldn't you?"

"Uh, no!" Skinner shook his head wryly. "You earned 'em fair and square, and you'll take them with good grace I hope, Mulder."

"Yes, sir." Mulder sighed, and got up to return to bed. "Good night, sir. And, um, you know, thanks." he whispered.

"My pleasure, Mulder," Skinner shook his head. "My pleasure. And I think I can trust you to sleep in the spare bedroom again. There's no need for you to sleep on the floor in my room any more," he gestured with his head in the direction of the other room. Mulder stood there, uncertainly.

"I'll be fine on the floor," he muttered. "You know, for one more night. I, uh...don't want to be alone. Not tonight."

Skinner knew what it must have cost Mulder to admit that, so he just nodded, and turned away so that Mulder wouldn't see the expression on his face and realize how dangerously close to tears he was himself. When he went up to bed a few minutes later, Mulder was pretending to be asleep. Skinner picked up his book again. He was aware of Mulder's eyes watching him as he read, studying his face intently as if doing his own reading. Skinner endured the scrutiny, hoping that Mulder would find whatever it was he was looking for.

Mulder was subdued the following day, but his attitude had changed completely. Skinner didn't have any meetings, so Mulder spent the entire day standing with his head resting against the wall of his boss's office. Skinner had secretly decided that if Mulder behaved well he would reduce his punishment. The AD remained as brisk and forceful as ever though. He ignored Mulder during the time his agent spent facing the wall, but talked to him over lunch. Mulder was polite, if a little quieter than normal. <If he's really using the time to work this stuff out in this head then so much the better, Walter.>

Skinner would have liked to relent about the strappings, but instinct told him that however hard it might be for both of them, Mulder needed to know for future reference that contrition and explanation, although welcome, would not always get him out of punishment.

In the evening, after Kim had gone home, Skinner sighed and glanced over at his troubled agent.

"All right, Mulder. You can move. Come over here and give me the strap," he said softly. Mulder nodded, glumly, stretching his stiff muscles, handing over the strap without protest, and positioning himself swiftly over the chair, despite the pain he was clearly in from the repeated punishments. He sobbed from the moment the strap made contact with his already heavily welted backside, but endured the strapping without complaint. Afterwards, Skinner took him out for a huge meal, then asked him for the punishment book.

"No more strappings," he told his agent, crossing the remaining strokes off the ledger. "And today was the last day you spend facing the wall. Tomorrow you can help me with my work. Your insights might come in very useful on a couple of cases I've got on my desk. And I'm doing this because I'm pleased with your progress, and in my experience a carrot is as good as a stick." He smiled at the younger man. Mulder smiled back.

"Talking of sticks...?" He glanced at the book.

"No, Mulder. I'm going to make you take every last one of those licks you earned for risking your life in such a stupid way. That's something I feel strongly about, and I want you to understand just how strongly."

Mulder stared at Skinner with wide eyes, as if trying to understand this thinking, then he nodded.

"Okay. Although...I'd prefer to take the strappings rather than the canings..." he murmured.

"I'm sure you would," Skinner chuckled. "But it's not a process of negotiation, Mulder. What I say goes, and if you push me on that, I'll reinstate the whole lot."

"I'm not! Honest!" Mulder held up his hands in mock surrender.

Mulder found the remaining canings to be a real test of his endurance though, and he begged Skinner to hold back.

"I can't do that, son," Skinner told him softly. "Do you find it easier if I go fast or slow?"

"Slow," Mulder whimpered. "No, fast...oh god, they both hurt..."

"It'll soon be over," Skinner reassured him. "Only another couple of days. You can manage a few more days, Mulder, can't you?"

"I...yes," Mulder said resignedly, "I guess."

On the final day, after it was all over, Skinner took Mulder out for a drink.

"Drinks are on me," he grinned. "I think that's only fair."

"I'm not going to argue with that," Mulder grinned back.

"Do you understand me a bit better now, Mulder?" Skinner asked his agent quietly over a few beers.

"Yeah. I suppose I thought nobody could ever take Mac's place, but I guess you just did!" Mulder looked rather pleased by the idea.

"And, uh, what's my grade?" Skinner asked.

"What?" Mulder looked confused.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Mulder, but you've just spent the past few weeks giving me a test. It's usual to be graded after taking a test." Skinner looked at Mulder over his beer glass, his eyes serious.

"Well, you didn't do too bad," Mulder grinned. "That whole corner thing was a good touch. I hated that."

"I thought you would," Skinner nodded.

"And the over the knee thing. That was the worst. I hated that too."

"I kind of had a feeling that you did," Skinner chuckled.

"And I had no idea what your job entailed before. I'm sorry you get so much grief about the X Files inside the Bureau - I didn't realize what a good friend you are to us, defending us like that."

"Thank you, Mulder." Skinner looked surprised.

"And I really enjoyed that balloon ride," Mulder said. "I'd like to do that again sometime."

"No problem, I'd like that too," Skinner nodded.

"And you're pretty mean with the cane - although frankly your aim's not always what it

could be. You might like to work on that," Mulder grinned.

"Watch it," Skinner warned. "It's not too late to add another couple to that punishment book."

"Oh yeah. That! I hate that damn book." Mulder got it out of his pocket. "Can I burn it now, sir?"

"I don't think so, Mulder. I really, really hope there won't be a next time, but I think you should hang onto it just in case there is."

Mulder sighed and put it back into his pocket. "So, " he mused thoughtfully. "I'll give you nine out of ten."

"Only nine? Where did I drop a mark?" Skinner demanded hotly.

"You took a lot of pushing in the first place before you got really tough," Mulder grinned. "I lied to Mac, ditched him, lied to you, mouthed off at you and ditched you, but you still didn't react until after I actually ran off on that mission."

"I was trying to give you the benefit of the doubt," Skinner shook his head. "I don't think that was wrong. You needed to work this out in your head and come to your own decisions, Mulder."

"I guess," Mulder shrugged. "I know where I stand now, sir. I promise I won't be such a pain in the butt again."

"Your butt, Mulder. Your pain," Skinner said with a laugh. "But all the same, I'd appreciate that, son. I take it that the test is over now?"

"Uh, yeah." Mulder smiled guiltily, crossing his fingers behind his back.

"Mulder?" Skinner raised an inquiring eyebrow. "You didn't have another 302 for me to sign, did you?"

"No, sir. Only, I heard about this creature they've spotted living in Lake Michigan and..."

THE END

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