

= Zero Sum (The X @-@ Files) =

" Zero Sum " is the twenty @-@ first episode of the fourth season of the American science fiction television series The X @-@ Files . It premiered on the Fox network on April 27 , 1997 . It was directed by Kim Manners , and written by Frank Spotnitz and Howard Gordon . " Zero Sum " included appearances by William B. Davis , Laurie Holden and Morris Panych . The episode helped to explore the overarching mythology , or fictional history of The X @-@ Files . " Zero Sum " earned a Nielsen household rating of 11 @.@ 7 , being watched by 18 @.@ 6 million people in its initial broadcast . The episode has received mixed to positive responses from critics .

The show centers on FBI special agents Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) who work on cases linked to the paranormal , called X @-@ Files . In the episode , a case Mulder is asked to investigate is covertly covered up by the agents ' boss Walter Skinner (Mitch Pileggi) , who has made a sinister bargain with The Smoking Man (Davis) .

The decision to center another episode around Skinner ? following the third season episode " Avatar " ? was made when Gillian Anderson took a week off to shoot the film The Mighty . Rather than have Duchovny carry the additional workload , the writing staff decided to focus the episode on supporting cast members . " Zero Sum " was the final appearance in the series by Morris Panych . In addition , the episode saw the return of the virus @-@ carrying bees from the season @-@ opener " Herrenvolk " and would later return in the 1998 feature film .

= = Plot = =

At a postal routing center in Vienna , Virginia a woman is killed by a swarm of bees in the bathroom while taking a cigarette break . Assistant Director Walter Skinner (Mitch Pileggi) , working for The Smoking Man (William B. Davis) , covers up the death by deleting the file on the case from agent Fox Mulder 's (David Duchovny) computer , cleaning up all the evidence at the scene , burning the woman 's body in an incinerator and replacing the police 's blood sample for the case by posing as Mulder . As he leaves the police station , Skinner is chased down by Detective Ray Thomas , who believes he is Mulder . Skinner tells him there is nothing on the case warranting his involvement , and leaves .

Shortly after Skinner arrives home he is met by Mulder , who tells him about the case and the fact that someone is going to great lengths to cover it up . Mulder reveals that Detective Thomas was killed , which shocks Skinner . Mulder tells Skinner that Scully is undergoing tests regarding her cancer . Later that night Skinner meets with The Smoking Man , who is accompanied by Thomas ' murderer , the Gray Haired Man (Morris Panych) . Skinner is angry that Thomas was killed and wants to end their arrangement , which The Smoking Man refuses to allow . Mulder calls Skinner , telling him about the woman 's body being burned and the blood evidence being tampered with . Mulder tells Skinner that he is trying to match the bullet that killed Thomas to a gun issued to a federal agent or local officer . Skinner searches his drawer and realizes that his gun was missing and must have been the one used for the murder . Skinner , realizing he has been set up , calls The Smoking Man , who confirms that Thomas was killed with Skinner 's gun and that by going to the police Skinner would end up implicating himself in the murder . The Smoking Man refuses to provide any details on what he is covering up .

Skinner returns to the routing center where he tears a hole in the bathroom wall and finds a large honeycomb of dead bees . He visits an entomologist to look at one of the bees and is told that Mulder visited him six months ago about a similar subject . Skinner finds Mulder 's file on the matter , copying down the contact information for Marita Covarrubias (Laurie Holden) . Mulder tells Skinner that a bank near the police station took a picture of the detective , which shows him with Skinner , but the picture is too obscured for Mulder to identify him . Skinner calls Covarrubias , who does not have any evidence to provide him at this time . The entomologist is killed by a swarm of bees . The next day , Mulder and Skinner look at his body , which is infected with smallpox transmitted by the bees . Skinner visits the co @-@ worker of the postal worker who died , who tells him she was pressured to not say anything about what happened by men who demanded a

damaged package . At the photo lab Mulder analyzes the photo , which reveals Skinner 's identity .

The Smoking Man meets with the Syndicate , who are responsible for the bees . Soon afterward a swarm of bees attacks a school in Columbia , South Carolina , and one of the teachers dies as a result . Skinner heads to the hospital , where he is met by Covarrubias . She demands to know what he knows about the matter . He tells her he believes that the bees are being used as a carrier for some sort of experiment . Skinner returns home where he is confronted by Mulder , who now suspects that Skinner has been working against him all this time . Skinner is able to convince Mulder that he would not have forced his own drawer lock open and hence could not have been the murderer . Convinced of Skinner 's evidence , Mulder turns in the gun with the serial number filed off so Skinner is not blamed for the murder . That night Skinner confronts The Smoking Man in his apartment , angry that nothing has been done for Scully . The Smoking Man convinces him that Scully will die if he kills him and Skinner leaves without killing him , but not before firing warning shots . Shortly afterwards Covarrubias calls The Smoking Man , who tells her to tell Mulder what he wants to hear while an unknown man is shown behind her listening on another phone .

= = Production = =

Co @-@ writer Frank Spotnitz described the episode as a " fortunate accident " . Late in the fourth season of the show Gillian Anderson left the show for a week to film her part in the film *The Mighty* . The producers , knowing that they would have to write an episode without Dana Scully , decided it was not fair to have David Duchovny carry the same workload as in a normal episode considering her absence . As such , a story was devised in which his involvement would be light . This resulted in the decision to write , for the second year in a row , an episode focused on Assistant Director Walter Skinner (Mitch Pileggi) . Howard Gordon , having written the previous Skinner @-@ centric episode , " Avatar " joined Spotnitz and the two wrote the episode over a weekend while another Gordon written episode , " Synchrony " was in production . The writers felt that this was the perfect time to bring in Skinner 's deal with The Smoking Man (William B. Davis) to cure Scully 's cancer , made in the episode " Memento Mori " . Frank Spotnitz said of Skinner 's deal , " The hard thing for Skinner was that we had to keep him in the middle . We had him tell Mulder not to bargain with The Smoking Man in order to save Scully 's life . And then he himself struck a Faustian bargain with the Cigarette Smoking Man and was in his debt for some kind . "

The writing staff felt that " Zero Sum " was a logical place to bring back the bees that were used in the season premiere , " Herrenvolk " , feeling it was important to not have something paranormal happen to Skinner in this episode considering that had been done in the previous season . Live bees were used for filming , but showed up poorly in the footage ; visual effects technician Laurie Kallsen @-@ George then spent nine days digitally enhancing the footage to improve upon this . The virus @-@ carrying bees would later form a central plot point in the series ' 1998 feature film adaptation .

Director Kim Manners noted that the episode " was a really good show for me , because I had not got a chance to work with Mitch . And they wrote a great script , you know ? It was really something he could sink his teeth into and he just did a great job . Bill Davis was fabulous in that show too " . This was the second episode of the series to not feature Scully , the first being the second season episode " 3 " . Guest actor Morris Panych , portraying the Syndicate assassin The Grey @-@ Haired Man , makes his last appearance in the series in this episode . Panych had previously appeared in " Piper Maru " , " Avatar " , " Herrenvolk " and " Memento Mori " .

= = Broadcast and reception = =

" Zero Sum " premiered on the Fox network on April 27 , 1997 , and was first broadcast in the United Kingdom on BBC Two on February 11 , 1998 . The episode earned a Nielsen household rating of 11 @. @ 7 with a 17 share , meaning that roughly 11 @. @ 7 percent of all television @-@ equipped households , and 17 percent of households watching television , were tuned in to the episode . A total of 18 @. @ 6 million viewers watched this episode during its original airing .

The episode has received mixed to positive responses from critics . Zack Handlen , writing for The A.V. Club , rated the episode an A , calling it " utterly bad @-@ ass " . Handlen felt that the episode effectively toyed with the series ' usual narrative structure , making lead character Fox Mulder seem " nearly as much of an antagonist " as The Smoking Man ; Handlen also felt that " Zero Sum " gave significant insight into the character of Walter Skinner . Paula Vitaris , writing for Cinefantastique , rated " Zero Sum " one @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half stars out of four , noting that its " pacing and tone are off " . Vitaris felt that " Duchovny and Pileggi give good performances " , despite Pileggi seeming " unintentionally comic " at times ; though she noted that " an episode without Scully feels pretty empty " . Robert Shearman and Lars Pearson , in their book *Wanting to Believe : A Critical Guide to The X @-@ Files , Millennium & The Lone Gunmen* , rated the episode four stars out of five , noting that " Pileggi looks much more comfortable here than he did in last year 's showcase [' Avatar '] " . Shearman and Pearson felt that the episode 's attempts to tie into the wider storylines ? the appearance of Marita Covarrubias in particular ? are where it " really stumbles " ; noting that its success lies " in the shock value of seeing a deliberately familiar story through the fractured view of another character " .