

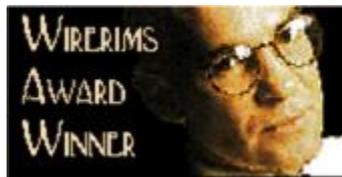
Contagium by Xanthe



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

Story Notes:

Posted: 29th Jan, 2000.



Posted: 29/1/00

This story was written especially for my dear friend, Sergeeva, for her birthday.

Both the lovely pics on this page are courtesy of Frogdoggie.

Special thanks also to RAC.

You'll have to suspend disbelief over any incorrect medical details and hokey science in this one, especially if you work in medicine!

AWARDS

Nominated for a **Spooky** in the Outstanding Scully/Other category

Winner of a Wirerim in the Outstanding Skinner/Scully category.



Chapter 1 by Xanthe

Contagium: the specific virus or other direct cause of any infectious disease.

It was the stench, the overpowering, sickening stench that alerted Scully to the fact that they were nearing their destination. Driving through the night with a pure, white moon shining in the sky and getting jolted around in the big truck, she had almost been able to believe for a few hours that she wasn't living this nightmarish existence.

They had traveled in silent convoy across rough country, and Skinner had told her to use the opportunity to snatch some sleep. She should have taken his advice, but it was too tempting to enjoy the respite of a few hours away from disease and sickness and that goddamn awful **stench**. Too tempting to pretend that she was back in the past, driving in a world she could still remember so clearly. There was nothing outside to remind her of what her world was like now. In the dark, with the beautiful moon and the sweetly scented country air, it almost felt like the past. Almost. Scully stole a glance at the man beside her driving the truck. Typical of him to instruct **her** to sleep, but take no rest himself. She had offered to share the driving, but he'd been adamant.

"When we get there, they'll need a doctor. A well rested, alert doctor," he'd stressed tersely. "I can take the opportunity to sleep then," he added grimly.

Only he wouldn't. Scully knew that from long experience. As soon as they arrived at their destination, his job, like hers, would just be beginning. Oh, he wouldn't tend the sick, or begin the difficult task of identifying this new mutation. Instead, he'd oversee the setting up of the makeshift hospital. He'd organize the supplies, assess the needs of the stricken local population in respect of food and uncontaminated water supplies, organize living quarters

for her and her medical team, and set about making her life easier in the one hundred and one ways he always did. She closed her eyes and pulled her knees up to her chest, resting her feet on the long seat, and laid her head back against the window, feigning sleep to please him. In the old days, she'd have driven alongside Mulder, laughing or teasing as they always did, an endless succession of traded jibes - the comfortable familiarity of knowing someone so well. Skinner never teased. Of course, there was little to laugh about these days. Maybe the current circumstances would have silenced even Mulder's irrepressible spirit. Maybe.

Mulder.

The ache of wondering where he was still hadn't gone away, even after all these months - and neither had the resentment either, if she was honest. When the virus had first hit the population, there had been chaos, and she supposed that they had all made their decisions according to who and what they were. Mulder would have been useless tending the sick and dying, so he had taken himself off in search of the faceless men who had brought this all too man-made disaster to their world. Scully, possessed of a more pragmatic disposition like Skinner, had thrown herself into taking care of the mess they were in now. What did it matter who had caused it and why, when people were dying and desperately in need of medicine and care?

Skinner had been true to his own personality as well. With the President and most of Congress dead, he'd addressed himself to the one significant task facing them: containing the sickness and defeating it if possible, although it looked more and more as if that was a lost cause, despite their best efforts.

Skinner had worked tirelessly, setting up a base just outside Washington, arranging for all medical supplies to be routed through there, as a central distribution center, overseeing who got what, and making some pretty tough decisions along the way. He'd lost weight, Scully thought to herself, watching him from under half-closed eyelashes. His face was gaunt, and his jaw was so firmly clenched that she wondered if he'd ever smile again. With a pang of guilt, she also noticed the dark shadows under his eyes and the weary lines etched into his forehead. He needed sleep, too, but she knew well enough by now that he wouldn't take it. If she'd found Mulder an exasperating partner, in Skinner she encountered an individual so obstinate that she sometimes wanted to pound her fists against that smooth scalp of his in sheer frustration. Mulder had often driven her crazy with his insane risks and wild theories, but it was Skinner who she had stand-up rows with, and he was, she had to admit, an eminently reasonable man - just so damn pig-headed, especially where his own health was concerned.

"We're nearly there," she murmured.

"Yes. How did you know?" He peered into the pitch black outside the truck. Without centralized electrical supplies to light the towns and streets, nighttime had taken on a hue almost inky in appearance, and the stars glowed more brightly. It reminded Scully of camping vacations with her father when she was a child - back in another lifetime.

"The smell." She shrugged and sat up properly, giving him a wry, humorless smile.

"Ah. Yes. Strange how you get used to it," he mused. "Until..."

"...it's gone," they both said at the same time. His expression softened just a fraction as they traded a knowing look. "Then you remember what it used to be like," she said softly.

"No point thinking about the past." He slammed his foot down even harder on the gas.

"No," she said, grabbing her hairbrush from the dashboard and tugging it through lank, lifeless locks. She wanted to look more human, even if she didn't feel it. Skinner was lucky in that respect, she thought, glancing at him again. Even when he was out in the field, he somehow always managed to look fresh. Only a seasoned eye would have detected the tiny signs that he was dead on his feet and functioning on auto-pilot. Scully had been truly astonished by his stamina over the past year. He had worked tirelessly, taking little rest and operating under conditions of extreme stress, but she hadn't seen him buckle yet. She was aware of how she had gradually come to rely on that strength to keep her going.

"Did you sleep?" he asked.

"No," she shrugged.

The lines around his mouth deepened in disapproval. "I told you to get some sleep," he snapped tersely. "You won't get a chance to rest for the next few days."

"I know." She pulled on a sweater. It was warm in the truck, but she knew it would be cold when they stopped in the town.

"Then why...?" he pursued.

"Because I wanted to feel human," she interrupted him. "For just a few hours, I wanted to pretend that I'm not up to my eyeballs in sickness and death and the goddamn smell of decaying bodies left on the streets because there's nobody left to bury them. I wanted to smell the scent of normality, to look at the moon, and sit and dream about the way things used to be, so don't damn well give me a hard time about it, all right?"

"We all want things we can't damn well have," he exploded back at her. "I drove because I wanted you to sleep."

"Well forgive me for not being able to follow every order to the letter," she yelled. "Next time I have insomnia, I'll present myself for court martial!"

His foot slammed down on the brake, and for a moment she thought she'd gone too far, but then she saw that they had arrived at their destination. Their argument was immediately forgotten. Working in such close proximity, laboring day and night without adequate rest, doing what was at best a tiring job, and at worst, downright grisly, the old barriers between Assistant Director and Agent had somehow disintegrated along the way. He remained in charge by force of will and by natural qualities of leadership alone. The FBI was just a distant

memory, most of its agents dead. It would never be resurrected. Nothing was ever going to be the way it had been before. She still called him "sir", and he still called her "Scully", or "Agent Scully" in occasional, forgetful moments, but they were old habits of convenience. Their working relationship had changed out of all recognition.

The truck's headlamps illuminated the town's name: *Carolina Springs*, and the first dim light of morning revealed a welcoming pile of decayed and diseased bodies. They were stacked on top of each other, and strewn around the streets as if the living had just had the strength to push the bodies out of the door. There was no energy for proper burial. There was just pure human expediency and the desire to survive.

"Welcome to Carolina Springs. Have a nice day," Scully mocked, getting out of the truck, and slamming the door shut behind her. The trucks made a loud noise in the silent town as the convoy rumbled to a halt, and the medical team started to unload supplies. A tall, thin man ran out from what had once been a school and looked at them as if he didn't believe his eyes.

"You came. I didn't think..." he trailed off, his wild eyes taking in the sight of the trucks and the people as if he was seeing a mirage. His gaze settled on Skinner, and with unerring instinct, he recognized the person in charge. "I'm Jonathan Farley." He held out his hand and Skinner shook it firmly.

"You're the person who contacted us?" he questioned.

"Yes. I wasn't sure there was anybody listening. I used the radio equipment...people said there was nobody to help. We thought maybe Carolina Springs was the only town left where anybody was alive."

"There are still a lot of people left alive, trust me," Skinner said firmly.

"Thank god. When the electricity cut out, and then the water and phones - it's so hard getting news," Farley said. "We sent people out, and they radioed back to start with, but then...then nothing. Some of them managed to get word that they were sick, but none of them came back. We thought everybody was dead."

"We're doing our best to reach every town in the country, but it isn't easy," Skinner informed the man. "The virus mutates every few weeks, and every time we figure out a way of treating one strain of it, another one comes along." Skinner rubbed a weary hand over his forehead. "The information you gave us made it sound like we had another mutation on our hands. We have to contain the mutations, or..." He gave a wry shrug, his eyes meeting Scully's, grim and full of a dark certainty. "Well, we have to contain the mutations," he finished. There was no "or", they both knew that.

"So if...if you didn't think our strain of the virus was a mutation, you wouldn't be here?" Farley asked, his face registering his shock.

"No. I'm sorry. Our job is to identify each mutation, then get the supplies needed to treat it. We have a network of people around the country, but we only go where we're most needed. Once a strain becomes treatable, we just send out the information on the radio."

"That's no use if we're not on the supply route!" Farley spluttered.

"I'm sorry. It's the best we can do." Skinner's face was lined with strain, and Scully felt a wave of irritation. Didn't this man realize what they were up against here?

"I can see it's everyone for themselves," Farley snapped. "I expect the big towns are okay. The government doesn't give a damn about those of us living in rural areas."

"There is no government, Mr. Farley," Skinner told the other man wearily. "There's just us. For your information, there aren't any big towns left, either. In fact, it's isolated rural populations like Carolina Springs that are doing best. The big towns all went with the first wave of the virus. At my last count, there were just a few thousand people left alive in Washington, D.C.." Skinner let that statistic speak for itself, and Scully watched the color drain from Farley's face. "Now, we're here to help. If we can contain this mutation, then we can stop it spreading and decimating what's left of the world's population. Perhaps if you could show us the way to whatever facility you're using as a hospital? We have work to do."

Farley nodded dumbly, finally taking in the magnitude of the situation. Scully felt sorry for him. Even now, knowing all that she did, there were times when the enormity of what had happened hit her all over again. On those times, she took herself away and wept in private. She was sure there wasn't anyone left who hadn't done the same - including Skinner. Watching the big man directing the operation so efficiently, it was hard to imagine him weeping, but everybody needed a release, and she was sure that he, too, must have endured his moments of bleak despair, as they all had.

"This way." Farley led them towards the school.

"How many people are sick?" Scully asked him. "Are there any new symptoms?" He glanced at her, frowning.

"This is Doctor Dana Scully. She's in charge of identifying the mutations and finding a treatment," Skinner explained. Farley nodded, trying to keep up with all this new information.

"Think of it as a particularly lethal strain of flu," Scully explained, having found this the simplest way of getting the information across. People simply couldn't get their heads around the concept of black oil, and experiments on human beings, for purposes she still didn't understand, that had unleashed this disaster upon the world. "It's a virus, so we can't treat it with antibiotics, and although it can be spread by physical contact, it often isn't. On occasion we've seen spontaneous outbreaks of the disease in isolated communities for no reason we've been able to understand."

"I see." Farley ushered them into the school, and Scully smelled the sickly sweet stench she had come to identify with the virus. It was the familiar odor of an old enemy, and she felt her fight or flight reflex send adrenaline running through her body.

"All right." Scully paced down a row of sick people lying on makeshift mattresses on the floor, identifying the worst cases and pointing them out to her medical team. "Get these people into a side room. The rest can stay here - they still stand a chance. I want blood samples and stats within 2 hours. Get moving, people."

Farley gazed at her, still in a state of shock. Scully felt as if she had shifted into a new gear, all weariness driven from her body by the current crisis. She caught Skinner's eye briefly, and saw something akin to amusement there, combined with profound respect, then the moment passed, and he was turning, issuing orders of his own.

"I want every able-bodied man, woman and child over 7 years old to meet me outside," he ordered Farley.

"What? Why? We thought it best if we didn't mingle in case we spread the sickness..." Farley protested, running after Skinner.

"Experience has shown us that once a town has the disease, it has the disease. Period. Everyone who is going to get it gets it, and it doesn't seem to have much to do with physical contact," Skinner told him tersely. "People who've barricaded themselves in their basements for weeks on end have been found dead. The virus has a way of spreading that we don't really understand. Sometimes it's clearly spread by human contact, but more often it isn't. We have no idea why. Now, I need people to bury that pile of bodies you've left outside. Before long people will start coming down with typhoid fever and cholera from contaminated water supplies, and trust me, those two can be just as deadly as the virus if you don't have the medicine to treat them - and we don't, not in sufficient quantity anyway. Time is short - let's get moving," he finished briskly, sweeping out of the school with long, urgent strides.

"Yes, sir," Farley murmured faintly, running to catch up.

Scully suppressed a smile as she watched them go. Having someone like Skinner around the place was reassuring. He always seemed to know exactly what he was doing and projected an air of authority that people responded well to. It comforted them, provided them with a feeling of structure in a world that had become as changeable as quicksand. She wasn't surprised that Farley had unwittingly started addressing him as 'sir'.

The next 30 hours passed in a haze of activity for Scully. The symptoms of the disease were, as always, mystifying in their diversity. This particular strain had its victims breaking out in a dark, red rash, and caused respiratory problems leading to a vicious strain of pneumonia that was killing people at an alarming rate. The virus itself was immune to antibiotics, but the secondary infections didn't respond to them either, and the sounds of rasping, labored breathing were a constant backdrop to her work.

She soon isolated the virus under the microscope. It was as familiar to her now as the back of her own hand, and she had grown to hate it, for all its kaleidoscopic beauty - and it **was** a thing of beauty. Multi-faceted, comprised of a myriad of swirling, interconnected components, with an ingenious method of seemingly unstoppable reproduction; and with each mutation it grew more deadly.

Scully had seen countless numbers of doctors and front-line aid workers killed by the disease, and wondered when her own time would come. There were few actual doctors left on her medical team - most were simply trained volunteers. She was now the senior qualified member of staff at HQ, and possibly, as far as she knew, in the whole of the USA, such as it was now. She sometimes wondered why she had been spared. She had worked more closely with the virus than anybody else, and yet she was seemingly immune from each and every mutation. There had been a time when every cough and each of her many headaches made her wonder if this was finally the virus coming to claim her, but that fear had diminished now. She had come to the conclusion that she was immune - and not just by chance. She suspected that the experimentation she had been subjected to during her abduction a few years before had somehow rendered her invulnerable to the deadly force of this particular virus.

Skinner was a different matter. He was the only other member of the makeshift crisis team who was left from the early days when the virus had first hit. He had been with her on every single front line mission, had been at her side as she identified each new viral strain and found a treatment for it, and he hadn't succumbed. She didn't know why, but she was grateful. Without him, they would be lost. He allowed her to do the job she did so well, and made that job as easy as possible within the circumstances. She knew that she didn't have the energy to do his job as well as her own. If he caught the disease...if he died... Scully paused for a moment in her work, finding that her hands were shaking uncontrollably. She took several deep breaths and a gulp of the coffee that one of her team had brought her. She knew she was consuming too much caffeine, but she had to stay awake.

"How's it going?"

She jumped and looked up to see Skinner standing in the doorway. He always checked up on her every few hours to see if there was anything she needed and to make sure she was remembering to eat. When Scully got involved in her work, she had a habit of forgetting about the outside world altogether, and if Skinner hadn't insisted she take regular meal breaks, she knew that she'd have worked all the way through without stopping.

"Fine," she nodded, putting the coffee down quickly as she realized how much her hand was shaking.

"Making any progress?" He came to stand beside her, and she could smell the scent of him. They all smelled less than savory, as it was hard maintaining even the most basic standards of hygiene in these conditions, and long baths and clean clothes belonged to distant memory. Skinner's odor was as familiar to her now as her own, and to be honest, she didn't find it displeasing. The smell of healthy human bodies was a welcome respite from the sickly

scent of the illness that permeated the hall next door, and the encroaching smell of death from outside.

"Some," she shrugged.

"Is it...?" He paused, and his dark eyes met hers, clearly fearing the worst. "Is it the one?"

She knew immediately what he was referring to. It was classified information, restricted to the two of them, his deputy Julia Mareno, and Scully's own right hand man on the medical team, Eric Hunter. According to the data she had collected thus far, the mutations were rapidly escalating in severity. Soon it would evolve beyond their capacity to deal with it, and after that - they were all dead. Even that small minority of people who had suffered from the virus before and lived would not survive infection from the expected mutation that Skinner was referring to.

"No." She was quick to dispel his worries and saw him heave a visible sigh of relief.

"Actually, this mutation isn't all that dissimilar from the one we found in..." She gestured to the microscope, then stopped as he grabbed her hand.

"You're shaking," he stated. It seemed almost like an accusation.

"Caffeine overload," she smiled wanly.

"Time to take a break - and get some sleep," he ordered.

"Not yet. I'm close and..."

"Now." He didn't raise his voice, but his tone carried the weight of his authority. Scully stared at him for a moment, but his expression didn't soften. "I've set up some living quarters in a house nearby. I've also arranged for a hot meal." He let go of her wrist, strode over to the door, and held it open.

She considered arguing - god knows they'd had enough stand-up rows over the past few months, but the thought of food, of taking the weight off her aching feet and closing her eyes for a few hours was too tempting. With a resigned sigh, she walked over to the door. He didn't look so good himself, she thought, knowing that nobody watched out for him, and made him eat and sleep. His face was etched with weary lines, and his normally tan skin was pale and gray.

The living quarters Skinner had selected were just across the street from the school. Scully followed behind him, walking in a haze of exhaustion, when their path was blocked by an angry Jonathan Farley.

"What are all these troops doing here?" he demanded, waving a hand at the dozen armed guards who patrolled the perimeter of the school. "Trying to stop the sick from leaving? Just what kind of experiments are you conducting in there, Skinner?"

Scully felt a surge of anger break through her weariness. Their job was difficult enough without encountering hostility from the local population, but Skinner's reply was reasoned, firm, and scrupulously polite.

"They aren't to stop the sick from leaving. They're here to protect my staff."

"Protect them from what? The dying?" Farley demanded, raising an eyebrow in disbelief.

"No, from the living. In a country full of sick people, a doctor is more valuable than gold, and there aren't many of them left," Skinner said tersely, one hand coming to rest on Scully's shoulder in a subconscious, protective gesture.

"What?" Farley choked. "There are people who would...?"

"Kidnap a doctor? Yes. It's happened to us," Skinner responded tersely. "We lost a few that way until we started providing armed escort. We have to take precautions."

"I suppose so. I'm sorry," Farley muttered, shame-faced. "I just never thought people could turn into such savages."

"They're desperate - their loved ones are sick and dying, and they're scared for themselves," Skinner sighed. "I sympathize with them, but those guns aren't for show. My staff has orders to shoot to kill. We might be trying to save lives, but I'll be damned if any of my people will be harmed for doing their job."

Scully smiled to herself and rolled her shoulders to relieve an ache in them. Protecting his people had always been one of Skinner's primary concerns, even before this catastrophe. She was suddenly aware how very safe his hand made her feel, resting on her shoulder. Farley stepped out of their way, still red faced, and Skinner guided her to what would be home for the next few days or weeks, depending on how long it took. She felt a sudden wave of absurd gratitude towards him. She was so bone tired that she was in danger of toppling over, and she liked the feel of his hand touching her, reminding her in the midst of this inhuman situation that she was, at the end of the day, still flesh and blood.

Scully sat down to a meal of minced beef and rice. Food, at least, was one problem they didn't have to worry about. Although nobody was producing any and fields were left unplanted and livestock untended, there was enough canned food to last the dwindling population for several years. It might not be fresh, but it would keep them from dying of starvation.

A few other members of the crisis team ate with them, trading jokes as a respite from the extreme stress of their work. She joined in, despite her weariness, enjoying the comradeship and banter. Julia Mareno was busy talking to Skinner in a low voice, going through a roster duty with him, talking about the supplies they would need. Her dark head nodded as he took in the information she was giving him, and he issued a series of commands for the next working day. Julia had been a godsend. A former secretary with a large computer company, she'd walked into their headquarters 8 months ago and quickly made herself indispensable. She'd lost her entire family - her 3 children, her sister, her parents - but she wasn't unique in

that, and she battled on, as they all did, channeling her grief into something constructive. She worked well with Skinner, being almost as efficient as he was, and between them the two of them kept everyone fed, found places for them to sleep, and coordinated supplies.

Scully watched Skinner devour his food without tasting it. Food had become merely fuel, a necessity to keep them all going and no longer something to be savored and lingered over or enjoyed for its own sensory satisfaction. Scully wondered when, if ever, they would be normal human beings again, taking simple pleasure in food, in drink, even in each other. She knew several people had flung themselves into brief, intense sexual liaisons, knowing that death could call for them at any time and wanting to make the most of every last moment of life. She hadn't been tempted, and occasionally wondered if that was simply because she was always too tired to even contemplate it, or whether somehow Mulder had taken a greater hold on her heart than she had thought.

"Bed," Skinner said, and Scully jerked her head up, realizing that she'd fallen asleep over her meal.

"Yeah. I think so."

He got up and led her down a hallway to a bedroom. It wasn't much, just a mattress on the floor, but it was enough.

"Home, sweet home." She smiled at him, allowing her gaze to wander around the shabby room, with its peeling wallpaper and faint odor of damp.

"Next time I'll arrange for a vase of fresh flowers beside your bed," he grinned absently, as if he was so tired he'd forgotten that smiling was something he didn't do. Skinner always ensured she had her privacy. The rest of the team slept in a dormitory arrangement on these missions away from their main base, but Skinner was insistent that she have her own room so that she wasn't disturbed by people going to and fro while she slept.

"You're our only hope for the future," he'd explained when she protested. "We have to take care of you." A part of her had bristled at that. Nobody took care of her, she could take care of herself, but another part of her, so long suppressed, was pleased, and she wasn't sure why.

"I hope you're going to grab some rest too," she told him.

"I already snatched a few hours while you were working," he replied with a shrug, and she knew that was a lie. Too tired to remonstrate, she threw herself down on the mattress and was asleep before she even landed. She didn't see him pull the blanket over her sleeping form and gently touch the side of her face before he tiptoed out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

She awoke a few hours later, feeling refreshed by the rest. She still felt as if she could sleep for a year, but her pounding headache had lessened. The first thing that caught her eye was a splash of orange on the floor next to her. She stared at it for a long time before it came into focus, and then she gave a little gurgle of surprised pleasure. There, propped up in an

old can of beans, now filled with water, were four brightly flowering roses. True, one of them was past its best and losing its leaves rapidly, but the colors were so bright and so near, they took her breath away. Her eyes filled with tears. She had become so used to living out of trucks and makeshift hospitals, so used to despair and the ugliness of disease, she had forgotten that the world could be beautiful too. She lay there, just appreciating the flowers for a long time, wondering at how much her life had changed that something so simple could bring her so much pleasure.

Finally, she got up and yanked a brush through her hair. She couldn't remember the last time she'd looked in a mirror, and she assumed that she looked a mess, but keeping the tangles out of her hair made her feel halfway human at least. Scully wandered outside. It was late evening and getting cold. She ran back, grabbed the blanket from her bed, then wrapped it around her shoulders and walked back outside.

A dog was barking in the distance, but other than that the town was eerily quiet. Another ghost town. Scully could barely remember the bustle of people and cars that had been part of her old life. Nowhere was well populated now. The stillness had become as familiar as the stench. She inhabited a world of extremes, where the nights were darker, the smells sharper, and the silence more profound than she had ever known before.

She was about to cross over to the school when a streak of orange on the horizon claimed her attention. Reminded of her flowers, she turned towards it with a smile. It was a sunset - a glorious, vivid sunset. As she watched, she caught a glimpse of a figure crouched on a small grassy hill at the end of the street. She walked over, scrambled up the hill towards him and then stopped.

It was Skinner. He was dressed in his usual uniform of faded blue jeans and open-necked dark shirt, and the cool wind was billowing through the shirt, making it rise and swell around his body. The fading, orange light of the sunset was casting him in fiery shadows of red and gold, burnishing his scalp and making his dark eyes seem almost black. The shadows smudged over the weary lines on his face, and he looked younger and more relaxed than she was used to seeing him. He suddenly sensed that he was being watched and looked up at her. She smiled, and crouched down beside him, swinging the blanket over his shoulders.

"You're cold," she chided, feeling his chilled flesh through his thin shirt.

"Yeah. I didn't want to move, though - in case I missed it." He nodded his head in the direction of the magnificent sunset. "You were right, earlier." He cleared his throat and continued gazing into the distance, not looking at her. "If we can't stop and appreciate what's still so good about the world, if all we see is the sickness, and pain, then what's the point of carrying on?"

"I agree." She hunched up her legs so they were touching her chest and struggled to contain the blanket as it flapped wildly in the wind. Skinner pulled his end of it close around himself and then wrapped a big arm around her shoulder, shielding her from the worst of the wind, and keeping the blanket tucked in tight around them both. It felt snug, and secure.

Scully almost laughed, thinking back to a time when the very idea of sitting on a hillside with her granite-faced boss, huddled up in a blanket with his arm around her would have had her reeling in surprise. Skinner was not a man she had ever imagined sharing such intimacies with, but the times had changed them, and when you saw a man day in, day out, at his best and his worst, old boundaries just disappeared. The sun gave one brief, blazing flash of glory, before it sank down out of sight. Scully watched the last remaining glow of orange and red, leaning her head on Skinner's shoulder. They were silent for a long time, savoring the beauty of the moment, and then she turned to look at him.

"Thank you," she murmured.

He shrugged. He was so warm and solid, such a big, reassuring presence beside her. She could feel the hard contours of his muscles through his thin shirt.

"Sorry about the vase," he said, by way of reply. "It was the best I could manage."

"It was perfect. The flowers were beautiful. Sometimes it's easy to forget..." She stopped, her words choking in her throat.

"I know. You reminded me of that. I'm sorry. I know I can be...single-minded," he grimaced. "It's just there's so much to be done, and..." his voice dropped, "the truth is, I get scared. Sometimes it feels as if we're the only ones standing between the human race and the end of the world. We're the only ones who can stop the apocalypse, and I see us running out of time, out of energy, out of supplies..." He trailed off, and she knew she had found him in one of those moments of doubt and despair that they all experienced. "I wonder what this world would be like without us - maybe it would be better. Or maybe some new creature will evolve to take our place," he continued, staring thoughtfully at the encroaching darkness. "Is it a battle we can't win, Scully? Will I let us down?" He looked at her for a moment, and she was grateful for being here, with him, at this moment in time. He so rarely let people in - he always shouldered his burdens alone. When he was ordering everyone around, running on adrenaline alone, sheer exhaustion making him bad tempered and snappy, it was easy to forget that he was only human, mere flesh and blood, as they all were at the end of the day.

"It's not all down to you," she chided him gently. "Don't think that I haven't had my moments, too, when I've thought it would be my failure that would destroy us all. I still do, occasionally. You've done more than any of us to keep people alive, to get the supplies through to those most in need. You were the only one who saw the necessity of tackling each mutation before they got out of hand. It's your vision that's stopped the world turning into chaos."

"Well, being an administrator always was my best, and probably my only skill," he murmured in wry self-deprecation.

"You're much more than that." She dug her finger into his ribs to scold him. "Just look at them." She stared down the hill to the town, where a few people were crossing to and fro from the school, scurrying around like a handful of little ants. "You're keeping them going. It takes more than just a talent for organization to manage to keep order and resolve when so

much is in a state of disintegration. They could have run out on us, fled to save themselves, but they don't. They stay because they believe in you and what you're trying to do."

"Is it a lost cause, though?" he murmured. She had never seen him like this - so open and so vulnerable. She saw then that his mantle of single-minded purpose was one he donned to keep them all going. Underneath, he had the same doubts and worries as they all had - he just kept them hidden so that people would have something to believe in and a rock to cling to, some sense of permanence in an all too rapidly changing world.

"No. If we go down, we'll damn well go down fighting," she retorted, quoting one of her mother's favorite phrases.

"Ah, that's my fighting Scully. Always full of fire," he said with a wry grin.

"And you've been too much in my firing line recently. I'm sorry about that," she said with a sigh. "My mother always said it was my red hair. I've struggled all my life to keep my temper under control, and I used to be able to do it too, but these days..."

"You're too tired, too stressed, too soul-sick to hide what you feel. So am I. We lost the niceties of civilization awhile back," he said with a chuckle. "The polite veneer of 'yes sir', 'no sir' that hid our true feelings on any given subject."

"I don't remember ever wanting to yell at you **that** much..." she mused. "Although now you mention it..."

"Don't go there, Agent," he told her with mock severity.

She laughed out loud. "Yes, sir. No, sir," she replied slyly, and he squeezed her shoulder, and gave a belly laugh himself.

He looked so different when he laughed, she thought. She really had seen him at his best and worst since they had been plunged headlong into this nightmare. She couldn't remember ever seeing Assistant Director Skinner laugh like this, couldn't have imagined him cutting her four orange roses just to brighten her day, or sitting watching a sunset on a hillside wrapped in a blanket, baring his soul to her. She couldn't have imagined having a stand-up argument with AD Skinner either, the way she had of late, both of them going for it hammer and tongs, with all guns blazing. She couldn't have imagined him ever being this dirty or unwashed and unshaven, dressed in torn, stained clothing, or clearing up huge piles of blood and vomit, or standing bare-chested, his body caked with mud as he worked alongside a dozen volunteers digging a mass grave, but she had seen him in all those guises.

"I miss being Agent Scully," she commented suddenly, an old memory sparked into life by his words.

"I miss being Assistant Director Skinner," he murmured in reply.

"How come you never know they're the good old days when you're actually living them?" she sighed. "If I'd known, I'm sure I'd have tried to...I don't know, enjoy myself more."

"I know what you mean." The wind picked up, and he pulled the blanket even tighter around them. "Time passed so quickly, an endless supply of paperwork, meetings, briefings, debriefings, and goddamn internal bureau politics. I could have done so much more with my life if only I'd known..."

"Yes." She rested her head on his shoulder again, and they sat for a few more minutes. It was a brief respite from what awaited them down the road. Finally, by unspoken agreement, they got up. Skinner folded the blanket and tucked it under his arm, and they walked back together.

Scully wasn't sure when she had become inured to the sight of dying, but she had seen so many people of all ages, that at some point it had all become a faceless blur to her. She knew that they were real people, with real lives and their own sets of memories, but now she just saw pale and all too fragile human flesh, where once she had seen the people underneath.

She walked through the hall to her makeshift research laboratory, not even hearing the cries of the sick or the rattling gasps for air as one man slowly, loudly, died. Others slipped away without protest, there one minute, then gone. Their bodies were piled outside the school to await burial.

Scully worked on the virus for another day, pausing only to take meals when Skinner reminded her. Finally, having come up with a tentative treatment, she ventured back out into the infirmary to begin testing it. There was no time for finesse or for using non-human guinea pigs. She took a dozen vials and a box of syringes, and went looking for those who were in the best shape. Bitter experience had taught her that there was no point wasting precious medicines on those who were so far gone, they'd die anyway. It was a harsh judgment for harsh times, and Scully hated playing god this way. She could remember a time when her ethical soul would have revolted at the very thought of it, but that had been a long time ago, and she was older, wiser, and more cynical now. The need for sheer survival had taken away the luxuries of conscience that she had once had.

She knelt beside a bed, handed some of the vials and syringes to her team, and started work on the nearest patient. As she worked, she saw Skinner out of the corner of her eye. He was crouched beside one of the sick, showing him a photograph, asking the same question he always asked wherever they went.

"Have you seen this man? Do you recognize him?" He always received the same reply. A shake of the head, and sometimes a whispered, "I'm sorry," and he would move on to the next, and then the next.

"No news?" She caught up with him, prepping the patient he was talking to.

Skinner shook his head. "Not this time," he said.

He always said it like that. "Not this time," as if one day he would receive the answer he knew she wanted, as if it were only a matter of time. Privately, she doubted he would ever get that answer.

She tried not to look at the photo, but she couldn't help herself. Mulder was smiling in it, his hazel eyes laughing at her. She remembered the day she had taken it, how he had been in the middle of one of his legendary diatribes about some aspect of the paranormal, and how she'd only been listening with one ear as he rambled on and on while she took photographs of the crime scene. Finally, in an effort to silence him, she'd pointed the lens at him and said: "Shut up or I'll shoot you," and he'd opened his mouth, his eyes dancing with mischief, daring her to shoot him anyway, and she had - with the camera - and he'd been laughing the whole time. She felt suddenly dizzy as the memory swamped her. It had been another lifetime, and a different Scully.

"Scully." She felt Skinner's hand on her arm.

"It's nothing. Sorry. I just..." She sat back on her haunches for a moment and took a deep breath. "It's been months. We haven't heard from him in all that time. We have to face facts," she told him.

His expression turned into granite, closed and remote. "I'll keep asking," he replied.

"And you'll keep getting the same answers. If he is alive, he knows where we are. He would have contacted us," she said.

"**We** haven't come down with the disease - he might be immune too," Skinner stated implacably, refusing to give up - on Mulder, on any of them, Scully thought to herself. The loss of Mulder still twisted inside her like a knife through her heart; it was a real, physical pain. Sometimes she felt that she would have done **anything** to have him back, to see him again for just one minute, to hear that low, monotone voice, to throw her arms around his neck and hug that lanky body and never let him go.

"He isn't coming back," she said, more to protect herself from the pain of eternal hope than because she truly believed it. "He's never coming back." She brushed a lock of damp, sweaty hair from her forehead. "When will you ever get it through your bloody head that he's damn well not coming back!"

Skinner gazed at her in mute disagreement, and they locked eyes for a moment. Then he got up, turned on his heel, and strode out of the building.

Days turned into nights, and they all melted into one exhausting, never-ending miasma of testing, refining, nursing and dispatching the corpses. Scully lost track of everything but the need to keep putting one foot in front of the other. The disease hit its peak, then faded, leaving countless decimated lives in its wake. Towards the end, Scully found Jonathan Farley desperately clutching the hand of a dying child.

"My daughter. She's my daughter," he wept, looking up at her, his eyes wild and full of a despairing hope that she could work a miracle. Scully looked at the little girl and tried to feel something, anything, for the pretty, blonde child, lying pale and listless on the mattress, but she didn't feel anything.

"I'm sorry." She placed her hand on Farley's shoulder, remembering that she should say the words, but unsure what they meant, if anything.

"She's still alive. You can do something...please, do something," he begged.

She shook her head. "We've given her the only treatment we have. It doesn't work on everyone." In truth, the treatment worked on only fifteen per cent of the patients, which was a drop in the ocean as far as Scully could see.

"Don't let her die. You mustn't let her die!" Farley clung to Scully, screaming and yelling. She fell off balance, landing with a crash, bruising her elbow. Within seconds Skinner was by her side, pushing Farley away, wordlessly helping her to her feet.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." Scully repeated over and over again, like a mantra, barely able to walk straight, let alone think.

"Come on. It's over now. You've done everything you can here. We're busy clearing up. You can grab some rest before we leave," Skinner told her, wrapping an arm around her and helping her back to their living quarters. As they got to the door, she heard a blood-curdling scream, and turned back to see Farley clutching the now lifeless body of his daughter to his chest.

"Why do we bother? What's the point of any of it?" she muttered. Skinner didn't reply, he just guided her across the street and back to the house.

Scully wasn't sure how much time had passed since she'd last been here, but when she got to her bedroom, she found faded orange petals on the floor, and the stark, bare remains of her roses in their improvised vase. She sat down on her mattress and stared blankly into space, too drained and exhausted even to cry.

When she awoke, it was late afternoon, and she could hear the trucks moving around outside. She got up, feeling stiff, and went out into the hot, sticky air. Skinner was busy ensuring that all their equipment was inventoried as it was returned to the trucks. Supplies were too scarce for them to leave any behind. He handed her a sheet of paper.

"Mission stats," he muttered, turning back to his work. She took it numbly and read it, but the words blurred in front of her. The numbers were getting worse: 93% of the local population had contracted the disease, of which 83% had died. 5% had survived through the strength of their own immune systems, and 12% had survived as a direct result of the treatment she had devised. She crumpled the paper in her fist.

"What the hell is the point!" she yelled at Skinner, throwing it back to him. "The odds of people surviving are just getting worse and worse. We might as well just make them comfortable instead of trying to treat them."

"I don't accept that. There are people here who are alive because of you and your work," Skinner told her urgently.

"It isn't enough. It's never enough. It's so fucking pointless!" she screamed. "Don't you see that? Oh god, why do we do it? Why?" She could feel the angry tears blinding her, and he stepped over to comfort her, and all she could do was hate him. Hate him for being there, for making her carry on when she was sick to death with all of it. He reached out and put gentle hands on her shoulders, and she pushed him away furiously, then slapped him hard across the face, then again, her fingernails raking into flesh, causing a flash of red blood to rise on his chin.

"Scully. Dana." He reached for her again, and she pummeled his chest with her fists, over and over again, wanting to hurt someone else as much as she was hurting, needing the release. He endured her anger for several long minutes, making no move to stop the onslaught. Finally, she ran out of strength and energy, and she pulled back, breathing heavily.

"I'm leaving. I'm not coming back with you. Go. Just go!" she yelled, then she turned and ran, blindly, the tears rising in her eyes, not wanting him, of all people, to see her cry.

She ran and ran, and then she stopped and sank to the ground where she was standing, the tears streaming down her face. She cried for that little girl she had seen clutched in Jonathan Farley's arms, for her own lost mother, and the brothers she hadn't heard from since this nightmare had begun. She cried for Mulder, and for that tall, solid, grim-faced man on whom she had just poured out all her frustrations and left standing by the truck, but most of all she cried for herself. She cried for what she'd lost, and what she'd seen, and what she'd become, and she didn't stop until she was spent. Then she just sat, bereft of energy, staring into the distance. She sat there for hours, and would have sat there for days but as night fell, the cold settled into her bones and only her own discomfort spurred her into action. She got to her feet, and began the weary walk back to the outskirts of the town, where the trucks were.

She wasn't sure what she would find. God knows, Skinner should have gone and left her. None of this was his fault and it wasn't fair that she had taken out her grief upon him. She deserved to be abandoned. Her breath caught in her throat as she drew close and saw that all the trucks were gone. All save one. And, seated beside it, wrapped up in a blanket waiting for her, was Skinner. She walked up to him, and he got to his feet. She stared, blankly, at the dark, red streak of blood on his jaw and then opened the door of the truck, and got inside. He went around to the other side and got in himself, started the engine, and began the long drive home.

Scully closed her eyes and rested her head on the window. She knew she should apologize, but she didn't have the words to break the silence between them, and he drove without so much as glancing in her direction.

"We took samples from the survivors and the people who were immune. One day we might have gathered enough data to find a common link..." Skinner said, finally, an hour later.

"Whatever." She scowled out of the window.

"When we get back to the base, we can analyze what we brought back with us, run it through our database, and..."

"I know," she snapped. "I know the goddamn procedure."

"You're tired. Get some sleep," he snapped back, his patience finally wearing thin.

"Is that another fucking order, **sir**?" she growled.

"Yes, it's another fucking order. Get some fucking sleep," he bellowed, "and wake up in a better fucking mood."

Scully glared at him, but he ignored her, and finally she closed her eyes and allowed sleep to claim her. She wasn't sure what happened. She heard a thump, and the truck screeched to a halt, and the next thing she knew, there were people swarming everywhere.

"What...what's..." she began, her hand going to the gun lying on the floor of the truck beneath her feet.

"Oh shit, SCULLY!" Skinner's words were cut off as someone grabbed him and pulled him bodily out of the truck.

"No!" she yelled, bringing up the gun, but it was knocked out of her hand. She lay winded on the seat of the truck and dimly, in the gray dawn air, she saw Skinner lunge out of his captors' hands towards her.

"Drive!" he shouted. "Get out of here!"

"Not without you!" she yelled back, and then it was too late, someone was holding a gun to her head. She watched, frozen in time, as one of their assailants, a tall, wild-eyed youth, hit Skinner hard across the jaw with the butt of his rifle. She heard a snap as his head was thrown back, and he slid down into the dusty ground, unconscious.

"NO!" Without even thinking, she slipped out of her captor's grasp and fell onto the ground beside Skinner. Blood was trickling down his face, and he was completely still. She reached out to see if there was a pulse in his neck, but someone pulled her away. "Let me go, let me go..." She kicked and bit but there were too many of them, and she was overpowered and slung back into the truck.

"He's just the driver," someone was saying. "She's the doctor, she's the one we want."

"What shall we do with him?" another voice asked, and a man rolled Skinner over with his foot.

"Leave him," was the curt reply, and then she found herself surrounded by six armed men. Three of them clambered into the back of the truck, while the others crammed themselves in beside her.

"What are you doing? You can't...?" Scully glanced around in panic. "You can't leave him. He'll die - it's the middle of nowhere, for God's sake!" she remonstrated as one man started the truck and began to drive away.

"Tough," the driver snarled.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded. "Why the hell are you doing this?"

"Because we need a doctor. We're dying," the man beside her responded softly. "And you can help us. We heard what you did in Carolina Springs."

"We didn't do anything. Didn't you see the number of people we buried over there?"

"You're a doctor. You can save us," the man repeated stubbornly.

"That's no reason to kill my friend! Why the hell do you think I'd want to help you when you killed him?" She craned her head and glanced in the mirror. Skinner was just a dot lying abandoned in the dust far behind them, still unmoving.

"You'll help us, or we'll kill you. Simple as that," the driver said with a shrug. "Look, I'm sorry, but we're desperate. We'd do anything."

"I don't care. Stop the damn truck. Turn around!" she yelled. "I won't go anywhere without him." She reached out, making a desperate grab for the radio, but she never even got close before the man next to her swung his gun down on the equipment, shattering it into oblivion. She screamed out loud in anger and launched herself at him. One of the men glanced at the driver, and he nodded. Something rough and smelly was placed over her face, and she took a deep breath, drawing up her strength to fight, and then everything went black.

Scully awoke to find herself in a bed. It was comfortable and warm. She moved, mumbling blearily, her head aching, then came to with a start. A woman was standing by the door, holding a gun. She was middle-aged, her dark, chestnut hair streaked with gray, her face careworn and grief-stricken.

"Who...?" Scully's memory flooded back in, and she pushed her hair back from her face with a groan. "Oh, shit," she muttered.

"Did they hurt you?" The woman came over and handed her a glass of water. "I told them to be careful. You're very valuable to us."

"I'm not some kind of commodity," Scully snapped, taking deep gulps of the water, "and I'm not going to help you. Your people killed my friend."

"I'm sorry, but you will help us," the woman stated implacably. She took hold of Scully's arm and dragged her out into the corridor and down a flight of stairs, into the large living room of a farmhouse. Scully stopped and looked around in dismay. The room was filled with the

bodies of the ill and dying. "Most of them are family to me, one way or another, so you can see that I'm kind of desperate," the woman told her, gesturing with her gun.

"We've all lost people. You're no different," Scully snapped.

"We stayed out here, alone, away from all the sickness and death that you and your godless kind have brought upon the world," the woman hissed. "We stayed out here, and prayed to the good Lord to deliver us, but we couldn't escape the pestilence. Even living hard-working, God-fearing lives, we still succumbed to this evil plague. Now, I'm not going to sit around and watch my people die. You'll help us, or so help me, I swear I'll kill you."

"I will help you, but only if you go and get my friend. Until he's brought back here, I won't do a damn thing." Scully stood, her arms crossed over her chest. The other woman stared at her for a long time, and they faced each other down for what seemed like an eon, then the woman nodded her head, curtly.

"You get to work, and we'll see what we can do about your friend," she snapped. Scully thought about it for a moment, then nodded. It seemed to be the best deal she was going to get.

"I'll need some equipment from the back of the truck," she said, striding towards the door. A young man, standing on guard, blocked her path, and pointed his gun at her. She brushed it away irritably, and he looked over her shoulder for guidance. The woman nodded, and he stood aside and let Scully pass.

She walked wearily over to where the truck was parked. She seemed to be on a large farm. There were several buildings and outhouses, and she could already smell the unmistakable odor of diseased and dying bodies. She brushed a fly away from her face and clambered into the back of the truck. She reached out to grab a pack of medical supplies when the blood on her hands caught her eye. Skinner's blood. She glanced sideways and saw Skinner's bag, lying on the floor of the truck, abandoned. Just like him. Abandoned to die in the dirt and the heat of the sun, and the last thing she had done had been to yell at him. If he was dead, then she'd never have the opportunity to say she was sorry, that she hadn't meant it.

She opened the small bag, with shaking hands. There was a change of clothes inside, and a bar of soap. Her fingers touched something hard, and solid and she drew out the palm pilot he carried everywhere with him. Krycek had arranged for it to be delivered to him, just before the disease struck, maybe knowing it was all over. She could still remember the look of disbelief on his face as he'd opened the package, and found the slim, sleek, deadly device. She'd analyzed the data it contained, but there hadn't been time to come to any conclusions, as the whole city had been wiped out by the first attack of the contagium a few days later. Her fingers dug deeper, and she drew out a spare pair of his glasses, wrapped in a cloth, and gently stroked the fragile combination of metal and the glass, fighting down the lump in her throat. These meager possessions seemed so poignant, so much a part of the man she had come to know so well.

She picked up his sweater, and held it in her blood-stained hands, then raised it to her face and inhaled the scent. His scent. She was filled with a wave of despair. She couldn't do this without him, without his strong, reassuring presence holding her together. She couldn't carry on if he was dead; she might as well die too. She realized that he had been the only thing keeping her going for the past few months, and now he was gone. The image of him lying, bleeding in the sand, rose up again in her mind, and she flung herself over the back of the truck, and heaved out her guts onto the baking earth below.

When she'd finished, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, wrapped Skinner's sweater firmly around her waist despite the heat, grabbed the supplies she needed, and walked slowly, wearily back to the house.

The woman in charge was called Valerie. The enormous farm was less a family home and more of a commune, as far as Scully could tell. Some of its inhabitants were related but many were not, and they all seemed to belong to some strange religious sect. Scully's tired brain couldn't take in any more information than that. She set up her medical equipment, ordered Valerie to take the worst affected patients to an outbuilding where they would be quietly left to die, and then concentrated on those who stood a chance.

One thing became immediately apparent to Scully: this wasn't the strain of the disease that she had encountered in Carolina Springs. This was yet another new mutation. The irony of the situation was that if this small, desperate commune had enlisted their help and brought Skinner with them, he would undoubtedly have ordered the full crisis team out here, with all its equipment, and they would have had the benefit of more than just one over-worked, unhappy doctor.

Scully wasted valuable time turning the able-bodied into nurses and assistants, showing them how to take blood and how to administer medication. This mutation induced symptoms she'd never seen before, including an acute septicemia that acted so fast that people who had been alive and well at the start of the day were dead by sunset. Most of her patients went through recognized stages of the disease that she'd seen before, each lasting an average of three days before they died, but the severity of the symptoms and the fact that they didn't respond to any of her medicines marked out this particular mutation as being more dangerous than any she'd encountered before.

Scully worked flat out all day, then sat down at the table and ate a bowl of broth that was placed in front of her, barely tasting it. Valerie sat opposite, her grim face growing more lined with each passing second.

"What about my friend?" Scully asked, numbly. "Where is he?"

"Do you think I have people to spare to go back looking for one man when so many are dying and need nursing?" Valerie spat.

"You promised!" Scully exploded, rising to her feet angrily.

"I said what I had to in order to get what we need," Valerie replied, in a tone of pure steel.

"You bitch!" Scully had a sudden image of Skinner lying in the dirt, in the baking sun, dying slowly. He deserved so much more than that, after all he'd done. "You stupid, stupid bitch. Don't you know who he is? This isn't just about you, it's about the whole damn world, and he's the only one doing anything, **anything**," her voice rose a pitch, "to save us."

"He's dead," Valerie said tonelessly. "Nobody can survive out there in the heat. There was no point sending anyone back for a corpse."

"God forgive you then, because I sure as hell won't," Scully said in a low tone that was beyond anger, beyond even grief.

"I'm sorry for your friend, but we needed help." Valerie shrugged.

"And the needs of the few outweigh the needs of the many, do they?" Scully growled.

"When they're **my** few, then yes," Valerie replied bluntly. "Now get back to work."

"Or? You've lost your bargaining chip."

"You're a doctor, and you're not going anywhere. Healing's what you do, and my guess is that you'll do it. My people don't need to suffer because of your quarrel with me, do they?" Valerie's expression was as hard as steel. Scully glanced back into the other room, full of sick and dying people.

"You're wrong. I don't give a damn about them," she snapped, "and I don't give a damn about what happens to me, either. Kill me if you want."

"You might not care about them, but you do care about **it**, don't you?" Valerie hissed. "You care about what's inside them - I've watched you work. It's personal, isn't it? Just you and this disease. You want to defeat it - or die in battle. You can't just let it win, can you?"

Scully had never loathed anyone more than she did in that moment, as Valerie threw the truth in her face. She stood, fists clenched, hating that truth, and then silently, she turned on her heel and went back to work.

At the end of the third day, Scully realized that everybody who came down with this strain of the disease died of it. There were no survivors. No 5% who fought the disease and lived, let alone any who responded to treatment. She had nothing to show for her presence, and Valerie became increasingly distraught as she watched her people die. A tall, thin youth, called Chris, whom Scully had identified as one of Valerie's sons, and also as the man who had attacked Skinner, grew tense, whispering about her failure, telling Valerie to deny her both food and rest if she didn't get results. Valerie shook her head, too tired to argue with him, but not prepared to agree either.

Scully began to feel increasingly vulnerable in this hostile environment. Her failure was starting to look deliberate - but it wasn't. She needed her microscope - she knew that if she could just look at this mutation close-up she'd get the answers she needed, but all the research equipment had been packed in another truck, and she only had basic medical

supplies. She wondered if anyone was out looking for them. She didn't think anything could ruffle Julia's calm, but they had to wonder where they were. Maybe they'd even found Skinner's body by now. Scully didn't want to think about that. She unwound his sweater from around her midriff and took a deep, inhaling breath of the scent.

"I need you," she whispered, suddenly feeling unbearably lonely, stranded here with these increasingly desperate strangers. She remembered the many, tiny ways he had made her life easier, the little kindnesses, the way he insisted on her eating and sleeping, the four orange roses he had found for her. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to say goodbye, or to tell you what a good friend you've been."

Valerie died the following day. She was fit and well when Scully woke from a brief, two hour nap, then she developed septicemia and was dead within hours. Chris threw back his head and howled in grief when she passed away, then he disappeared outside for several hours. When he returned, there was a look of crazed grief in his eyes that scared her. The living room was dark, lit only by the few meager candles the commune had left. The living conditions were so primitive that Scully wasn't surprised so many were dying. At least the crisis team carried their own generator, so they could have electrical supplies wherever they went. Here, there was nothing. It was like living in the dark ages.

Chris glanced around at the dying, then looked back at Scully, a murderous expression on his face. "You bitch. You killed her," he said, taking a knife out of his pocket. The room fell silent.

"Chris, no, it wasn't her fault," a woman protested feebly.

"Yes, it was. She hasn't done a damn thing to save anyone since she got here. Over in Carolina Springs, she gave people a cure, and they lived. Nobody's living here! Everybody's dying."

"That's because it's a different strain of the virus. I don't have the equipment to treat it," Scully said calmly, getting to her feet and trying to straighten her stiff back.

"You lying bitch. You're killing them in revenge for your dead friend!" Chris spat, moving towards her, brandishing the knife. The few able-bodied people stood very still, watching, and Scully realized that none of them were going to lift a finger to help her. Maybe some of them even agreed with Chris.

"Go on then. Kill me," she snarled suddenly. "I don't care any more. I can't help you. I'm useless. I've never been any damn use." She spread her hands in a gesture of defeat. Chris advanced on her, clearly beside himself with grief. Scully closed her eyes and waited, wanting a final escape from this waking nightmare.

"Bitch," Chris whispered. He was so close she could smell his breath, and then she felt cool steel against her throat.

"Do it," she said, opening her eyes and staring at his deranged features. His face crumpled into an ugly mask of hate, and she felt a stabbing pain in her neck, and then a loud bang,

and silence. She stood there, shaking, unable to figure out what had happened in the dark room. She could feel blood trickling down her throat, warm and sticky, and then someone was holding her tight. She knew it who it was by the feel of hard, familiar arms under her fingers, before her eyes could even focus on him.

"I thought you were dead," she gasped when she could speak.

"You nearly were," he replied, holding her tight, keeping her standing when she thought that her knees would give way beneath her.

She looked down at Chris's dead body and realized that she was covered in his blood. Skinner held his gun ready, waiting for someone to challenge him, but the weary people were resigned to one more loss, and they turned silently back to tend to their loved ones. The lethargy that had prevented them coming to Scully's aid equally prevented them entering into combat with an armed and highly dangerous Skinner.

"Come on. We're leaving," Skinner grabbed her arm, and she followed him blindly out to the truck. They got in, and he drove away from the commune at top speed. Scully glanced at him as he drove. His head was red and blistered from sunburn, and he had a massive bruise down one side of his jaw, but other than that he seemed unharmed.

"What happened to you?" she asked. "She told me you were dead. She said you were dead." She began to shake uncontrollably.

"I almost was," he replied grimly. "I managed to drag myself to an empty farm, and holed up there until I could walk properly. There was bottled water, and food...and corpses," he glanced at her and she nodded, her teeth chattering. "When I was well enough, I followed the tracks of the truck up here. It looks like I got here just in time."

"Y...yes..." she managed to say. "I thought you were dead," she repeated, still in shock. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I wanted to say I'm sorry."

"For what?" he asked, surprised.

"Yelling at you and hitting you and being such a bitch," she babbled. "I thought you were dead, and the last thing we did was argue."

"You were tired and upset. I should have been more patient. I snapped, too. It was six of one..." He shrugged. "And anyway, I'm not dead, so it doesn't matter, does it?" he added, smiling at her in the darkness, his teeth gleaming white, and she had a sudden sensation of the most abject relief, like waking from a nightmare to find it wasn't true.

"Thank God." Her eyes filled with tears and she blinked them away. "Stop!" she shouted suddenly.

He slammed his foot down on the brake and looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"We have to go back," she told him.

"Back there? To those bastards who tried to kill you?" He raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"I know, but we have to. They've got a strain of the disease that I've never seen before. We need to take samples, we need to get the results back to the lab in DC."

"No. What we need to do is get back to safety." Skinner started the truck again.

"You don't understand," she said softly. "I think this one's it. It's the one."

He put his foot down on the brake again and stared at her in the dark. "Are you sure?"

"No, no I'm not - I didn't have any of my equipment, but the normal mortality rates aren't applying. I know they're a small sample, but the sickness is spreading like wildfire, and it's a particularly vicious mutation. We have to go back and help them."

"They kidnapped you, put a knife to your throat." His fingers found the flesh wound on her throat in the darkness and wiped away the congealed blood.

"They were ill, and desperate, and...if the disease runs its course, none of them are going to live to regret what they did, anyway," she said wearily. He thought about it for a moment, then nodded, and turned the truck around.

Nobody seemed surprised, still less interested when they returned. Valerie had been the heart of this community and without her, they were leaderless, shocked by the devastation this savage disease had wrought amongst them. Skinner kept his gun on clear display and didn't leave Scully's side as they worked, desperately taking samples, frantically testing new combinations of the drugs they had with them, but none of them worked. By now, Skinner was a skilled nurse. Scully marveled at how many skills they had all learned as she watched him bathe one of the sick people, and later, carry the woman's corpse out of the front door to join the pile on the makeshift pyre in the yard.

A week passed, and one day they looked around to find that they were alone amid the remaining dead bodies.

"I think you were right," Skinner murmured, getting up wearily. "This is the one."

"Yes," she nodded absently, going to sit on the bottom step of the stairs, staring into space.

"In some ways, they did us a favor by kidnapping you," he commented, walking over to join her, rolling his neck as he went. "At least, we've got a head start. This strain of the disease has died out here. It might not mutate in the same way somewhere else for days, weeks, or even months."

"Maybe," she shrugged. "We don't know."

"No, but we can take the samples back to the lab and start working on them straight away."

"Yes." She shrugged again, then bit on her lip as her back protested. "Oh god, what I wouldn't give for a hot bath," she murmured.

"Me too. But mostly, I just want to fall asleep for a hundred years."

"And be woken up by a kiss from a handsome princess?"

"I'd prefer beautiful, but I'd take whatever was on offer," he grinned, getting up and holding out his hands to haul her up. She rose with a groan, and they helped each other up the stairs and into one of the bedrooms. They both fell down on the bed and were asleep within seconds.

Scully woke almost a day later to the smell of warm water. She blinked. She judged it was about mid-afternoon by the position of the sun. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, and let out a yelp as her stiff back pained her, then she wandered along the corridor and stopped by the bathroom. The bath was full of steaming hot water. Skinner glanced up from where he was busy filling it from a huge cauldron.

"I heated the water over the fire," he explained.

"My God! How many journeys did it take you to bring it up here?" She exclaimed.

"A few. We need it, though." He smiled. "You can go first. I'll take the leftovers. I'm not dragging any more water up those stairs."

"We could share?" she suggested.

"In another time and place, that offer would have been so much more appealing," he grunted, a wry glint of amusement in his eyes.

"I know," her tone was wistful. "I mean it, though. That way, we'd both get at least some clean water, and seeing as you filled it, it's only fair."

"No. I'll let you have your privacy." He smiled, walking towards the door. She nodded, and started unbuttoning her shirt.

Ow," she murmured.

"What's the matter?"

"My back."

She felt his fingers gently probe the tender area and yelped again.

"It's sore. You need a good rub. Get in the bath and warm your muscles, then I'll see what I can do."

He disappeared, and she stripped off her clothes and settled into the bath with a contented sigh. This felt so damn good! She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a full, hot bath, and wondered how many journeys it had taken him to fill it. Usually they snatched perfunctory washes, but to be completely immersed in warm water was heaven. She glanced down at her body, watching as the dirt gradually seeped away, and closed her eyes again, utterly exhausted by the continual stress of the past few weeks.

"Dana."

She woke with a start to find Skinner standing beside her.

"I'm sorry. You fell asleep in the bath, and I didn't like to leave you. I found some shower gel."

He held it out to her, and she took it gratefully, not even embarrassed by her nudity. Somehow, after all they'd been through, she was beyond worrying about something so mundane. He turned to go.

"Could you soap my back?" she asked. "I can't reach, and I'd like to be really clean."

"Sure."

He knelt down behind her, and poured some of the green gel into his big hands, then lathered them together. She watched, fascinated by the simple action. She held her hair up as he gently rubbed the creamy lather into her skin, unable to repress a blissful sigh as he worked. She heard him chuckle.

"Feels so good," she murmured.

"I know. It's just taking a break from...everything," he replied. "Here." He picked up a cup, and poured the water over her back, then pulled her arms away from her head and poured some over her hair as well.

Scully couldn't remember the last time she'd given her hair a really thorough wash, and the warm water felt so good as it flowed down her scalp and over her shoulders. She put her head back, and he squeezed some of the gel into her hair and then massaged it into her head with long sweeps of his firm, blunt fingers. Scully sighed, relishing the moment, and wanting it to go on forever. "You missed your vocation. You'd have made a wonderful hairdresser," she mused.

"Hmm. I can honestly say that nobody has **ever** paid me that compliment before," he replied with a snort of laughter.

They were silent for a while as his fingers worked on her scalp, then slipped down to her back, his large hands easily covering her slender shoulders as he massaged her sore muscles, easing and soothing them until she felt a hundred times better. When he stopped, she wanted to grab hold of his hands and put them back where they had been. He picked up the cup and started pouring the water over her head, washing off the creamy lather until her

hair was clean and squeaked when he ran his fingers through it. Then he held up a brightly patterned robe for her.

"I found this," he said.

She looked at him in surprise. The robe looked so inviting and clean. He held it open, and she got out of the bath and stepped into it. It was two sizes too big, but it felt so good to be wrapped up in something fresh and comforting. He tied the belt for her as if she was a child, and she stood there, humming softly to herself, allowing him to. It had been so long since she felt special or pampered, and it felt too damn good to refuse. When he'd finished, she glanced down at the dirty bath water and put her hand over her mouth.

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's filthy," she apologized.

"Never mind. It's damn hot outside - I'll wash out there in cold water. I have a few things I need to do first, anyway."

"What?" She looked at him, and he shrugged.

"Get the bodies piled up ready for cremation," he murmured.

"Of course. Let me get dressed, then I'll help you." She walked towards the door, and he stopped her, putting one hand on her arm.

"No. I can manage. You take a rest. You've been working flat out for weeks. You're exhausted."

"I'm fine," she smiled.

"And I'm nearly done outside, anyway. I won't be long. There's some food in the kitchen. Go and grab something to eat."

So saying, he turned on his heel and left. Scully sighed. She wished he wouldn't keep telling her what to do the whole time. All the same, her stomach was rumbling, and she realized that she was starving. Taking that bath, she had found many unfamiliar contours to her body. Her ribs stuck out far more than she ever remembered, so she knew she had lost weight - too much weight.

She wandered downstairs in her bare feet and glanced into the living room, surprised to find it now cleared of the last of the bodies. Skinner had been working hard. She sat down at the table and devoured a tin of fruit and ate another tin of ham without even pausing for breath. It was a weird feast, but there wasn't much choice. She smelled burning, and wandered over to the door.

Skinner was standing in the yard beside an enormous pyre, a stick of burning wood in his hand. She watched him throw the stick onto the pyre, and the stack of bodies began burning immediately, so she guessed he'd thrown gasoline over them. He stood there watching them burn, then she saw his shoulders hunch, and his body almost turn in on itself. He

wrapped his big arms around his body and bowed his head, and her breath caught in her throat as she realized that his entire body was wracked by silent spasms of distress.

She stood, wondering what to do. She knew that he was too proud to have let his feelings show like this if he had known she was here. All the same, she couldn't just stand by and watch him endure this alone. A lump rose in her throat. There was something particularly heart-rending about the fact that it was Skinner standing alone out there, finally crumpling under the weight of his self imposed task. He'd seemed too big, too strong, too much the leader to buckle.

Scully found herself running out into the yard. He looked around, in alarmed surprise, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled his head onto her shoulder. He stood there for a moment, then buried his face into her gown and held on tight, his entire body shaking. Scully held him for a long time, until the fire had almost run its course, then she gently disengaged from him and led him back to the house.

"You need more rest too," she told him, leading him up the stairs and into the bedroom. He followed her blindly and sat down beside her on the bed. "Sometimes it gets too much for me, too," she said, trying to get him to look her, but his face remained resolutely turned away.

"I'm fine." He got up and went to look out of the window. "I just had a moment...like déjà vu. I wondered how many bodies I'd buried, how many dead bodies I've carried out, how many bodies I've burned. Too many to count, too many to even remember. I had a sudden flash of memory of a book on the Holocaust, and there were mass graves, and I felt like a guard in a concentration camp..."

"Stop!" she chided, going to stand behind him. "You've done so much. This wasn't your fault."

"Maybe not, but have you ever wondered why?" He turned his face to look at her for the first time, and his dark eyes were full of a kind of grief that was painful to witness.

"Why?" she repeated blankly.

"Why us?" he asked. "Why do we survive? Sometimes I wonder if there's something about me, that survival is my curse. It's happened so many times. I should have died before, Scully. In 'Nam, I was the only one who survived when my whole platoon was wiped out. I died out there, and somehow, I don't know how, I came back to life. I struggled with survivor's guilt for a long time after that, and now it's happening all over again."

Scully stared at him, wondering how she could know this man so well and yet not know him at all.

"You've never spoken about Vietnam before," she whispered.

"I know. I don't...unless...unless there's a point. This, though, this is a carnage far worse than anything I witnessed back then. I sometimes wonder 'why me?' Why am I the witness to all this?"

"I know. Me, too." She put her arms around him again, and her fingers gently soothed his back, trying to soften the hard, tense muscles.

"Why do we survive, Scully? Everyone who lived here is dead, and yet we were spared. Why?"

"Well, I always assumed it was because of the chip in my neck," she told him. "I don't know how or why, but I was abducted and experimented upon by the same people who unleashed this virus on us. I have to believe that the two events are related in some way."

"Yes. I suppose so. And I..." He hesitated, and she could feel his muscles tense again beneath her gently massaging fingers. "Well, I suppose I always assumed I was either lucky, or my survival was in some way related to the nanocytes Krycek implanted in my bloodstream. I don't know how or why."

"It's possible." Scully shrugged.

"I know we did the blood work on everyone who was immune and there wasn't any common factor, so maybe, other than that, I've just been lucky."

"Maybe." She hugged him even closer, smelling the scent of the fire on his clothes. "Look, you don't have anything to be ashamed about, or to feel guilty about. We all have these moments, times when we just have to give in and weep, or hit out and yell." She smiled ruefully.

"I know." His fingers played gently with her wet hair. "I know."

She turned, and somehow his face was too close and she moved in, and her lips found his. It was a slow, tender kiss, and when she drew away, he took a deep, gasping breath, as if she'd brought him back to life. She led him over to the bed and sat down, and he knelt on the floor in front of her. He gently parted the folds of her robe with questing fingers, and his lips brushed her belly. She put her arms around him, drawing him in close, and her robe fell open. He touched her newly revealed white breasts reverentially, gently caressing the tips until she moaned and put her legs around him, drawing him in even closer.

"Dana," his voice was low and throaty, full of arousal, and she lifted his face and kissed his lips again, tenderly. "Oh god," he muttered when they parted for air, and he was suddenly galvanized by need, throwing his big arms around her, burying his face in her naked belly and nuzzling her body. He was everywhere at once, a frenzy of activity, and she lay back, willing and acquiescent, wanting to lose herself in his embrace, to have respite for just a little while from the nightmarish world they were living in. Then he stopped. She looked down at him where he knelt, his arms still wrapped around her body, his face still buried in her abdomen, as if he didn't want to ever relinquish his hold on her.

"Walter..." She brushed the side of his face with soft, caressing strokes of her fingertips, and he looked up, his eyes full of both surprise and pleasure at her use of his first name.

"I'm sorry. I can't. I don't want it to be like this," he said.

"What do you mean?" She felt a surge of irrational anger that he had interrupted their lovemaking.

"For pity. For comfort. We've both seen people flinging themselves into sex in order to escape. That's not what I want. It's not..." he hesitated, then looked down. "It's not what you are to me." He got up suddenly, then strode out of the door without looking back.

Scully sat on the bed, feeling winded. She was so angry with him that she wanted to scream and yell and pound at him with her fists the way she'd done back in Carolina Springs. What did he want from her? A commitment to get married? In this crazy world? Why couldn't they just snatch some comfort like everyone else? Why did he have to live on some stupid moral plane of existence? And what the hell did he mean by 'what you are to me'? She didn't even want to think about the implications of **that** statement.

She looked down on her clean white body - she could still see the imprints from his sooty hands, could feel the gentle caress of his thumbs on her nipples, and she could have wept. Damn, but she had wanted to feel those hands on her body, had wanted to pull him deep inside her, had wanted to lose herself in the oblivion of sex...she slammed her fist down on the bed. Yes, she had wanted to use him. She had wanted to use him to remind herself that she was human, to use him as a means to escape, even for a short time. He was right, and she understood then that he had stopped not because he didn't want her, but because he knew that he was in danger of using her for the very same reason. A part of her admired his willpower, even while another part still resented him for his decision.

Scully got up and pulled her clothes on furiously, wanting nothing more than to get out of this damned house and back to the only place she called home these days. She paused to pull her still damp hair back into a pony tail, then ran down the stairs and into the living room. She packed up her medical kit, then went outside to throw it into the back of the truck...and stopped short.

Skinner was standing beside a bucket of water, stripped to the waist, washing himself. His muscles rippled under taut, golden flesh, burnished a warm tan by the sun beating down on his unprotected head. She felt her breath leave her body in a whoosh and sat down with a thump on the porch. He hadn't seen her, and she felt like a voyeur as he poured the water over his head, making his body glisten in the hazy mid-afternoon sunshine. He was a little too thin, just as she was, but his body seemed even more built than ever after months of hard, physical work. He finished washing and turned, and Scully got up, holding up her medical bag, not wanting him to know that she had been watching him.

"I'm packed. When you're done, we can get moving," she told him tersely. He nodded, equally terse, and she strode over to the truck and flung the medical pack in the back, then climbed up into the driver's seat. "My turn to drive," she told him as he got in beside her a

few minutes later, smelling clean, the small fringe of hair at the back of his scalp still wet from his impromptu shower.

"Fine," he replied, doing up his shirt. She pulled her eyes away and slammed the truck into gear, screeching off towards home.

Home. They arrived back in DC in the middle of the night several hours later. The base wasn't in the center of the city, which they had abandoned to the rats and cockroaches who fed off the many dead bodies, but in a small, rural area on the outskirts.

Scully accepted the greetings of their friends, returned Julia's heartfelt hug with one of her own, then trudged after Skinner to the biggest room in the base where he held a briefing session. Scully presented her team with the information on the new mutation, and the room fell into silence. Skinner finally revealed the truth: that they were facing a mutation that could possibly destroy them all. This was news they hadn't wanted to hear, and her samples and medical notes were all taken away to be examined and analyzed.

"We must view this as a gift," Skinner was saying as he galvanized them into action, a thin sheen of sweat covering his wide forehead. "We've been given a head start, a chance to study this mutation in advance. It will break out again, I've no doubt of that, but at least we might be ready for it when it does."

People exchanged glances, inspired by his confidence. Scully couldn't help smiling a wry smile. Only Skinner could make the worst news in the world actually sound as if it were a godsend. Not for the first time, she was impressed by how good a leader he was. He always had been, but in this situation he shone. He was good at inspiring his troops, not allowing them to see the despair she herself had witnessed just a few short days ago. Nothing seemed too difficult, no odds too insurmountable. He radiated a kind of gritty, determined optimism that was infectious, and he kept his team too busy for them to have much time to think - or worry.

She barely saw him for the next 24 hours as she oversaw the first stage of research into the mutated virus. He was busy being brought up to speed on developments in his absence. When she did see him, there was an embarrassed tension between them which hadn't existed before. She felt as if there was something unsaid and unresolved, but neither of them had the time or inclination to talk about it. She guessed that he'd had even less sleep than she had, because his face was lined and drawn, and dark shadows smudged circles under his eyes.

"Progress report?" he asked her tersely, and she handed him the data she had thus far managed to gather. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair and wiped some sweat from his forehead. He didn't look well, and her mind went back to the conversation they had shared about why neither of them had come down with the disease.

"I want to take another sample of your blood," she blurted suddenly.

He looked up from his reading, a frown on his face. "Why?"

"Just a hunch. Something...I'm not sure," she mused. "I want to see if the nanocyte activity in your bloodstream changes if you're exposed to the disease. Every other time we've taken a sample, it's been during a quiet time back here, at the base. I'm wondering..."

"Yes?" He leaned forward eagerly.

"Tell me, each time we discovered a new mutation, did you ever feel unwell?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes I had flu-like symptoms for a day or so, but not always."

"You never said anything." She couldn't keep the note of accusation out of her voice.

"I just assumed it was the stress, overwork, you know," he replied, bristling slightly at her tone. "Why?"

"Well, supposing you were infected? Maybe not every time, but often? Supposing you're not immune after all, but that the nanocytes are programmed in some way to fight the contagium?"

"You mean... I catch it, and then the nanocytes destroy it before it can affect me?"

"Yes," she nodded thoughtfully.

"It's possible I suppose, but even if it's true, what help is that to everyone else?"

"I don't know," she sighed, "but it's still worth investigating some more."

"Agreed," he nodded. "I'll drop by the infirmary later on today, but...if your hypothesis is right...I could be a carrier. If I'm not immune, I could have brought the disease back here." They looked at each in shocked horror, then she shrugged.

"We don't know that. It's all just guesswork at the moment."

"I suppose so." He ran a weary hand over his forehead. "You know..." he began. "Mulder was exposed to some part of the virus in Tunguska. It's likely he's immune to it, just as you are."

"Yes, but there are other ways to die," she reminded him softly. "Like a good, old-fashioned bullet through the head."

"You wish he was here now. Instead of me," Skinner said, and it wasn't a question - it was a statement.

She stared at him. "No," she replied, surprised that it was the truth. "No, I don't. Mulder couldn't have done what you've done. He's a brilliant man, but he isn't a leader. He doesn't like working with other people, and he doesn't always get the best out of them. He works better alone, or with someone he trusts, to bounce ideas off. You were the right person for this situation."

"I'm not talking about the situation. I'm talking about you," he said, in a low, hard tone, and she knew he was angry with himself for bringing the subject up.

"I don't know," she replied, getting up. "I don't know." She got up and walked away, wondering why she had just lied.

The results to Skinner's blood tests startled Scully into immediate action. Not only was the level of nanocyte activity in his blood up an astounding 400%, but he also had evidence of the most recent mutation in his cells - and what was worse, the nanocytes were losing their battle against it.

Scully ran out of the door at full pelt and along to Skinner's office. She burst in, to find Julia sitting there. "Where's Skinner? I need to tell him something important," Scully said urgently.

"He's gone." Julia stood up and shut the door behind Scully so they could talk in private.

"Gone? Where?" Scully repeated blankly.

"I don't know. He just told me he was going. He gave me a crash course on everything I need to do, and then he left."

"Damn him!" Scully fumed. "He's gone because he thinks he might be a carrier for the latest mutation."

"It might be worse than that," Julia said softly.

"Why?" Scully's heart plummeted into the soles of her feet.

"He wasn't well," Julia replied.

"Symptoms?" Scully demanded.

"Fever, nausea...a rash on his torso," Julia repeated the familiar litany, knowing what they would mean to Scully.

"NO!" Scully half ran to the door and opened it, then stopped, realizing she had no idea where he would have gone.

"Dana - he's gone away to die," Julia said gently.

"No, he'll get better, the nanocytes in his blood..."

"Couldn't fight this one. It was too much."

"He doesn't know that! He could have stayed. I could have..."

"Dana, he went because he didn't want to infect any of us. It might be too late. He might already have brought it back, but once he knew - there was no way he was going to stay. You know that," Julia told her.

"NO!" Scully said again. "He can't damn well die. I won't lose him again. I can't lose him again." She looked up into Julia's sympathetic eyes.

"I'm sorry," Julia murmured. "I know the way you feel about him."

"What?" Scully asked, her mind in turmoil.

"I've known for a long time. I can understand why as well. I feel the same - only he's never looked twice at me. It was obvious to me a long time ago that he's only got eyes for one person, and that's you."

"Yes." Scully accepted that truth without surprise. "I have to find him," she said. "I need a truck, one of the generator trucks."

"You can have one," Julia nodded.

"And medical supplies, and some of my research equipment."

"Whatever you want. Dana?" Scully looked back on her way out of the door. "I hope you find him," Julia told her, her dark eyes sincere.

"I will." Scully felt more determined than she'd ever been in her life before.

Scully packed what she needed into her truck, cursing him under her breath the whole time.

"Of all the stupid, pig-headed, stupid, idiotic, stupid... I am so going to shout at him when I find him, yell some sense into that stupid, pig-headed, stupid skull of his," she cursed, getting into the truck and setting it going. She didn't even know where she was headed, just that she had to head **somewhere**.

After ten minutes, she pulled over, trying to clear her head and think straight. She drove into DC, shivering as the truck ploughed along empty streets and past broken shop windows that had been damaged in the looting following the first outbreak of the disease.

She went to his old Crystal City apartment first, climbing up to the 17th floor, stepping over the putrefied corpses of people long dead. The place was a disease trap, and she knew he wouldn't be there even before she pushed open the unlocked door to his apartment. The stench in the building was too much for anyone to bear. She ran back downstairs and drove to the FBI building. There weren't so many corpses in the center of town, but the stench was even more unbearable, and Scully turned and drove away after only a cursory glance. She drove out of the city, then sat in the truck on the side of the road, wondering where the hell he could have gone. An idea occurred to her, and she froze. No, surely he couldn't have...but it was the only place left that she could think of, and it was exactly what Skinner would do. It

fit his sense of order. She put the truck in gear, slammed her foot down on the accelerator and started to drive.

She arrived at the commune a few hours later, having driven solidly without stopping. She had encountered no other traffic and drove flat out for the entire journey. She hoped this wasn't a wild goose chase, but she knew her Skinner, and she knew he wouldn't risk taking the disease to an uninfected area. He knew that everybody at the commune was dead, and he knew the mutation had been isolated to that place, in the middle of nowhere. He had gone back there to die, she was sure of it.

She saw his jeep as soon as she pulled up at the commune, and she breathed a sigh of relief that she'd found him. She jumped out of the truck and ran into the house, straight up the stairs into the bedroom they had shared in exhausted oblivion less than a week previously. She knew he was in there as soon as she got to the door - she could smell the disease like the old enemy it was, and she pushed the door open cautiously, hoping he was still alive, if nothing else. He was lying naked on the bed, covered by an old, patterned sheet, his body glistening with sweat.

"Damn you," was the first thing she said.

He shifted in the bed and opened his eyes blearily. "Go away," he muttered in reply.

"After I've taken so much trouble to get here? I don't think so." She walked over to the bed, and sat down beside him. "You stupid idiot," she said, placing her hand on his head. He was burning up.

"You have to work on that bedside manner of yours, doctor." He gave her a wry smile.

"If my patients go to such lengths to run away from me, what do you expect?" she retorted in kind, fighting down the desperation she was feeling inside. A cursory examination revealed that he had the same symptoms as all the previous occupants of this house - and every single one of them had died.

"I ran out of luck," he rasped.

"Not yet," she told him firmly.

"Yeah. It's time. I cheated death once too often. It's time," he said.

"No. I won't let this damn disease win," she snapped at him. "This time it's personal," she said firmly.

He gave a faint smile and shook his head. "Always did love the way you fight." He started to cough, and a spasm passed through his body.

"Stay here." She got up and ran back downstairs, grabbed her medical bag and a dozen bottles of water, and then ran back up to the bedroom. She poured him some water, and he drank it eagerly, then she started to unpack her equipment. She washed him down, made

him more comfortable, then drew another sample of blood from his arm. He shook his head, smiling at her efforts.

"Going down fighting?" he murmured.

"I'm not going down at all, and neither are you," she said reprovingly.

"Yes, ma'am." He closed his eyes and settled into an uneasy sleep.

Scully turned back to the equipment she'd set up on an available table and looked at the sample she had taken. Nanocyte activity had increased again, by an unbelievable 900%. She stared at her results and then back at Skinner. Try as they might, the nanocytes were clearly doing what she was doing, despite her denials: going down fighting - but going down all the same. Skinner's condition had deteriorated even since she had arrived, and she knew that he had less than three days left if this strain of virus followed the same path as before.

She wished she knew all the answers: how had the nanocytes protected him from all previous infections, and why were they failing now? She presumed that the savagery of this particular mutation was too much for them. Not for the first time, she wondered about the technology that had created them. How had Krycek gotten hold of them? What was the Consortium's interest in them? Was it even possible that they had been created to fight this virus in the first place, and the other deadly purpose for which they'd been used had been a spin-off of that main objective?

Scully sighed and pushed her glasses further up her nose as she examined the data. She was running out of time. She remembered the last time she had stood by Skinner's bedside. His skin had been mottled a dark black, his artery walls lined with carbon deposits that had almost killed him-- had killed him. She bit down on the end of her pen, an idea awakening in her mind. It was stupid. She knew that, but what choice did she have? Wasn't it worth the risk?

She got up and went to sit back down beside Skinner. His face was covered in sweat, and he looked so ill, she could have wept.

"Walter," she said softly.

"Hmm?" He opened his eyes, struggling to focus on her.

"Do you trust me?" she asked him, grabbing hold of his hand and looking into his eyes.

"With my life. Patently," he rasped, with a flicker of his trademark wry smile.

"I'm going to do something that could kill you." She dunked a washcloth in the bowl of water by the bed and gently bathed the sweat from his face.

"Okay," he agreed brightly. "I'm in your hands, anyway. I always was," he murmured, his voice fading. He closed his eyes again.

Scully looked down at him for a long time, then drew all her strength and went back to her notes. There was no evidence that the carbon would soak up the virus, and she knew it would cause him considerable pain, that it was just a wild, crazy hunch, but she couldn't sit by and do nothing. She went through Skinner's possessions until she found the palm pilot, then turned back to him.

He was unconscious, moaning softly in his delirium. She hated seeing him like this, so frail and ill. She was used to his vitality, to his sheer, bloody-minded obstinacy and the strength that had been an inspiration to them all.

"If this doesn't work, then...I just want you to know that I'm sorry," she whispered. He didn't move as she silently instructed the nanocytes to flood his body with carbon, but a few seconds later, as his arteries constricted, he jackknifed on the bed and cried out in pain. She hesitated, her hand trembling, then steeled herself to resist his hoarse, inarticulate screams, and continued flooding his system with carbon. It took several hours to build the carbon up in his bloodstream, by which time he was doubled over with pain, lying on his side in a fetal position, his whole body covered in sweat.

Scully examined his vital signs again, as she did every fifteen minutes, hoping for some change in his condition, but it only worsened. After seven hours, she had to force herself to stay awake, all too aware that this could be his last night, his last day, his last few hours alive. When she did her next examination, she thought that the rash on his chest had faded, but whether that was just because the threads of carbon were standing out in such hard, disfiguring ridges, she couldn't be sure. She washed the sweat from his body again, then lay down beside him and put her arms around him.

"It wasn't just comfort," she whispered. He didn't move. She pulled him close and kissed him on his unmoving lips, then lay there willing him to recover. "Get better, damn you," she whispered. "You can't die. Not now. I won't let you."

She remembered a cat she'd had as a child, how he'd become ill and the vet had recommended "putting him to sleep." Maggie Scully had asked her children if they wanted to be there when it happened, and Scully had been horrified at the thought that her cat would die alone, without anybody who loved him present. She had insisted on being there, and had stroked the cat's head as he died. Later they had taken him home and buried him in the garden. She wouldn't let Skinner die alone, either. She intended to be here with him, every step of the way, whatever happened. She curled up next to him, still holding him tight, and fell asleep.

"Hey," a low, rasping voice woke her a few hours later. She opened her eyes and found herself looking into his dark, intent gaze.

"You're a..."

"Alive? Yeah." He managed the ghost of a grin.

"I was going to say awake," she corrected him.

"Like hell you were," he snorted. "You thought I was going to die."

"Nonsense. I knew you weren't, because I'm the best doctor in the whole damn world," she teased, her heart beating so fast she thought it would explode.

"No disease would dare defy you, huh?" he asked weakly, convulsing against the pillows with a rasping cough.

"That's right." Scully sat up and examined him. His fever had lessened, and the rash on his chest had almost disappeared.

"Fighting fire with fire?" Skinner asked, glancing down at the ugly, black veins mottling his skin.

"It seemed worth a try. I don't really understand why it worked, but it did," she said with a smile. Her legs almost gave way as she realized the enormity of what she had done. He was going to live! She toppled onto the bed and sat there in silence for a moment. "Don't ever, ever run off without telling me again," she scolded.

"I wouldn't dare," he replied with a tired grin. He was seized by another desperate fit of coughing, and she pressed a glass of water to his lips, which he downed gratefully. "D'you think it's safe...to..." he managed to gasp, looking at his mottled skin, "turn the temperature down on these little bloodsuckers?" His whole body convulsed in pain, and she got up and grabbed the palm pilot.

"I have no idea, but we have to try sometime, if you're not going to go around looking like something worse than Frankenstein's monster," she said with a smile. She made some adjustments and watched in amazement as the bulging veins faded almost before her eyes. Skinner gave a relieved sigh and closed his eyes again.

Scully turned back to her medical data. If there had been a cure for him, then maybe there could be a cure for everyone. She worked non-stop for the next couple of days, nursing Skinner back to health and examining the nanocyte activity in his bloodstream. On the third evening, Skinner was well enough to sit up in bed. She brought him some heated soup, and sat down next to him, clutching the results of her tests.

"Report, Agent Scully?" He raised an eyebrow in her direction.

"Yes, sir," she replied with a grin. "I think I can use nanotechnology to..." she paused dramatically to drop her bombshell, "...effect a cure."

"A cure?" he repeated blankly.

"Yes. Trust me, I'm a doctor," she grinned.

"You've been waiting to say that for years, haven't you?" He glanced at the medical data she had given him, frowning as he tried to make sense of it. "A cure?" he repeated in disbelief. "After all this time. Are you sure?"

"I think so," she nodded, unable to keep the wide, Cheshire cat grin off her face. "The nannites in your blood replicate in order to fight the contagium. As far as I can see, all anyone needs is just one of these little bloodsuckers, as you call them, in their veins, and they'll have all the protection that they'll need."

"Christ. Who'd have thought that these bastards inside me, that I've hated for so long, would actually be a cure for anything? We need to get back to DC and get working on this..." He pushed back the covers and swung his legs out of the bed, but she put both her hands on his shoulders and dragged him back.

"You're not fit enough to travel yet. I'll go and come back for you later. You need to rest."

"I'm fine," he said tersely.

"And right now, I'm stronger than you, so get back into bed and do what I tell you," she told him firmly, pushing him onto the pillows and taking a naughty pleasure in the fact that he was too weak to resist.

"I'm not just going to sit around here when there's work to be done," he retorted angrily.

"That's exactly what you're going to do. Look, I've radioed them with the data, and I'll go back with the nanocyte samples I took from your blood so they can start replicating them. Then I'll come straight back here."

"No," he said in a determined tone.

"Yes." She faced him, and he glared at her. "Look," she said reasonably, "it's night, and neither of us is going anywhere until morning. Let's grab some sleep and then we'll talk about it again in the morning. If you're looking better, I'll consider letting you travel back with me."

"All right," he agreed with a sigh, allowing her to settle him back into the bed.

Scully crept out of the house two hours later, just before dawn, leaving him tucked up fast asleep in bed. She siphoned the gas out of his jeep, then climbed into her truck. She felt a vague twinge of guilt, but he was well enough to take care of himself. He just needed some rest, and he wouldn't get that if he went back to DC. She knew he'd throw himself straight back into work if he returned with her. He was able to walk, and there was a supply of food and water in the kitchen. He'd be fine until she returned - although she wasn't looking forward to the reception she'd get when she did venture back.

She was gone for three days, during which she worked non-stop with her deputy, Eric, showing him how to replicate the nanocytes. It wasn't difficult; the hard work would come later, instructing medical teams how to use them, taking them out into the world, and getting the cure to as many places as possible. That required organization and a logistical skill that she didn't have - but Skinner did. She wished she could have given him more rest, but she knew they didn't have time for that. With a weary sigh, she got into the truck and began the long journey back to the commune.

It was mid-afternoon when she arrived. She saw him from half a mile away: he was sitting on the porch, barefoot, dressed in a pair of jeans and a tee shirt, staring into the distance, waiting for her. She wouldn't have been surprised if he'd been sitting there for the entire time she'd been gone. He got to his feet as she drew up, and her breath caught in her throat.

He looked rested. His skin had lost that pale, clammy look, and now glowed its usual healthy tan color. She screeched the truck to a halt and jumped out, wanting nothing more than to run up to him and throw her arms around his neck, but as she got close, she saw that his body was taut with silent rage.

"You must really be missing Mulder, if you've started behaving like him," were his terse, first words.

"What do you mean?" she flared, too tired to stay calm.

"Ditching me," he growled.

"That's great, coming from you after what you did a few days ago!" she yelled at him.

"I had a good reason!"

"So did I! You needed the rest!"

"I **needed** to get back to DC! I still damn well do."

"Well, it's a good thing I damn well came back instead of just leaving you here then!" she yelled.

"Thanks. I'm **so** honored." He bowed his head mockingly. "And I'm so sorry that I'm not Mulder."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she asked, her temper flaring again.

"It means that I don't remember you ever arguing with him like this. I'm sorry I'm not him. Jesus, I must really piss you off to make you so mad!" he snapped angrily.

"Of course I didn't argue with Mulder like this!" she snapped back. "I wasn't damn well in love with Mulder!"

"What?" His mouth opened and then closed in astonishment.

"You heard," she retorted, then she let out a laugh of relief at having finally said it. "It isn't about you pissing me off, Walter. It never was. I've been in love with you for months, I was just too tired and preoccupied to realize it. There were times when I wanted you so much, all I could do was scream at you."

"I don't understand," he said in a bewildered tone.

"All those pent-up feelings had to go somewhere," she sighed. "I'm sorry I gave you such a hard time. I only figured it out when I thought you were dying. I knew I couldn't bear to lose you. I thought I'd lost you once before, and I knew I couldn't stand it again. When Chris was standing with his knife to my throat, I wanted to die, because I thought you were dead." She stepped up close to him, and cupped the side of his face with her hand. "It wasn't comfort, Walter. It was escape, yes, but not for fear, or to seize the moment. It took me a while to figure that out - in fact I think I only just did. I was driving back here, and I couldn't wait to see you, to be with you. It was all I could think about."

He caught hold of her hips with his hands and looked at her with an expression of bemused joy.

"I thought you were in love with Mulder," he said.

"I do love Mulder, but that was always different. I worked with him for seven years but nothing ever happened between us, Walter. I think if it was going to, it would have done. I've worked with you just as closely as I ever worked with him, and I know the difference between what I felt for him and what I'm feeling now, for you."

"Why?" he murmured, his eyes dark and full of a depth of emotion that she had often witnessed, but never understood before.

"Why do I love you?" She laughed. "Why wouldn't I? Why the hell wouldn't I? I never knew you until this disaster swept all of us along in its path, but God knows I fancied you even back then. I even kissed you once, remember?" she teased, tracing a finger over his lips. "I kidded myself it was gratitude, but I knew as soon as my lips touched yours that it wasn't. It burnt a streak of lightning up my spine, and made every part of my body tingle, and you - you acted like a shy teenager who'd never been kissed before!" She laughed, remembering.

"Not like that, at least," he chuckled, his big hands pulling her close. "Nobody ever kissed me like that," he whispered, lacing his hands through her hair and gently brushing her lips with his own.

She responded hungrily, reaching up to pull him close, opening her mouth and finding his tongue with her own, tasting him, desperate to be as close to him as possible. His hands ran streaks of fire over her body, caressing her bottom, her thighs, her back as they kissed until they ran out of air, then separated, laughing.

"Come with me." She took hold of his hand and led him into the house, and he hesitated, glancing at the truck. "The world can wait a few hours - I can't," she told him impatiently. He grinned and followed her up the stairs to the bedroom.

She started peeling off her clothes before they even reached the bedroom, and was completely naked by the time she hit the bed. He had managed to get his tee shirt off, and she soon divested him of his pants and briefs, then pulled him down on top of her. She could feel his erection digging into her thigh and grinned at him.

"I'm so glad to see that you're recovered, although I think I should make a **full** examination," she murmured, rolling over on top of him and taking his erect penis in her hand, reveling in the feel of that hard cock beneath her fingers. He moaned and thrust up against her, and she smiled again.

"I think that's working okay," she teased, removing her hand.

"Is that a professional opinion, Doctor Scully?" he spluttered, grabbing hold of her and pulling her down so that she straddled him, his hands gently caressing her breasts. She put her head back and moaned as his blunt fingertips rubbed her nipples. She was already wet, just from being naked with him, kissing him, finally belonging to him, as he belonged to her.

"I love you," she said.

"And I adore you, but you already know that," he replied, pulling her head down and stealing another long kiss.

"Yes...so many acts of kindness..." she whispered, running her fingers through his wiry chest hair, finding a nipple, stroking it. "I never knew it was because you loved me, though. I just thought...I don't know what I thought."

"I've loved you for a very long time, Dana Scully. A very long time indeed," he said, and his eyes were so serious that she shivered.

"I'm just sorry it took me so long to realize what I wanted." She kissed him again, then moved further down his body, licking his beautiful, honeyed flesh as she went. He tasted of salt and of a masculine musk that was so **him**, she became even wetter just from the scent and taste. She took his hard shaft in her mouth, and he moaned, thrusting up against her.

"Too soon. It's been a long time, and I don't want to disgrace myself," he gasped. "Come here," he sat up and pulled her back down next to him, gently caressed her body, then inserted his fingers into the moist folds of flesh between her legs. He found her clit and rubbed it, and she exploded as wave after wave of pleasure flooded through her body. This felt so good after so many months of a weary, soulless existence. She nuzzled into his big shoulders, sucking and biting, needing to taste him and feel his solid flesh against her own. Finally he rolled her onto her back and pushed open her legs with one big hand, rolling one of her nipples between the fingers of his other hand.

"Please...now," she whimpered, and he smiled, positioned himself over her, then slid his big, hard cock easily inside her. "Oh god!" she yelled, crossing her legs behind his back and drawing him deep within her body. "More, please...more..."

He started to thrust, long, slow, mind-blowing thrusts, that rubbed her clit with each movement, driving her wild. She looked up into that familiar, beloved face, and wondered how there had ever been a time when she hadn't known she felt like this about him.

"You feel like coming home," she whispered, reaching up to caress the sides of his face. She came a few seconds later, exploding into a white light that turned her body to boneless

ecstasy and her mind into a glowing field of stars. She was dimly aware of him coming inside her a few moments after, then he collapsed down beside her and pulled her lithe, white body against his large, tanned flesh.

"Home, sweet home," he grinned, and she smiled back, remembering.

They slept for a while. When she woke, she found four sunflowers, propped up in a vase made from an old can, sitting beside the bed.

"My mom always told me you could trust a man who brought a girl flowers," she whispered. He smiled down at her, one hand propping his head up.

"I almost can't believe you're here like this with me," he murmured, running a big hand over her slender thigh.

"What, butt naked?" She glanced down at her body, realizing that for the first time in months she felt relaxed, calm - even happy.

"Uh-huh." He dipped his head and stole a kiss. She gave it freely, wanting more. Always wanting more. "I'll never give up looking for Mulder," he said as their lips parted again.

"I know. Neither will I," she replied, and they smiled at each other.

They made love again, more slowly this time, as outside the evening turned into night. Then she lay in his arms, just enjoying the feel of him beside her.

"When I was a little girl..." she began.

"Hmmm..." His hands tightened around her waist as if he never wanted to let her go.

"I used to wonder what it would be like to wake up one day and find everybody gone," she whispered in the dark. His lips dropped a protective kiss upon her shoulder. "And then I used to worry, that there would be only one other person left, a man, and that I wouldn't like him. That there'd only be the two of us in all the world, and that we'd have to make children, but that I wouldn't like him."

"You were an imaginative child." He gently sucked her ear lobe. "It's okay, it's not going to happen."

"It could have happened." She shuddered. "Or near enough. If it hadn't been for you and what's in your blood, I might have ended up being the only person left," she added in a wistful tone.

"And the guy? The one you didn't like?" He kissed her again.

"Supposing it was Spender? Or Krycek?" She shivered, her flesh crawling.

"It's all right. It isn't going to happen. You'll never be alone again. I promise."

"I know." She turned in his arms and looked down on him, tracing his cheekbones, the shape of his nose and his lips in the dark, finding the black depths of his eyes. "I know that now," she whispered.

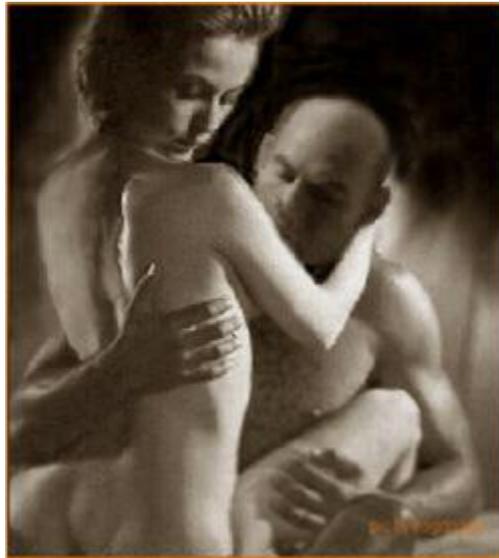
He smiled, his hands caressing her back and her bottom, her breasts crushed against his chest. "We should get some rest," he said.

"I know. Tomorrow we have to save the world," she said with a wry smile.

"But it's a world worth saving - full of the most beautiful creatures," he replied, dropping a kiss on her cheek.

She nestled into his warm, furry chest, and laid her head upon his wide, muscled shoulder. "Yes, it is," she agreed.

THE END



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