

Will you walk into my parlour?

By Luke Bridges (3rd prize)

This was certainly an unprecedented assignment. The only information they had been given was that they were headed to a small village squirrelled away in some mountain range (which one was classified), to investigate an incredibly virulent, microbial resistant virus they had managed to contain in the area. The symptoms? Classified. The effects? Just as classified. Needless to say this is not how Marcus Brutenholm had planned to use his PhD. Years of academia just to be bundled into a reinforced vehicle with three other researches and two worryingly armed soldiers.

Just as Marcus' hazmat suit had started to get uncomfortable the vehicle stopped, once the small blonde researcher across from him woke up from his fainting spell they left the vehicle.

What confronted them was beyond anything they anticipated. It was gently snowing from the overcast sky, the cold wind carrying the frozen flakes across their field of view, landing on the small rooftops. Clearly there was never much of a population in this town as there was no building taller than two stories and every shop was seemingly owned by a local. Now there was definitely no living people. The only signs there was ever anything living here were the lights left on in the houses. This of course was at least somewhat expected. What wasn't was the long tendrils of flesh spanning out from what was once human bodies, hanging from the houses like bunting made of skin and muscle. It was as if enormous squids had grown from the ground and grabbed everything around it before dying.

The blond researcher, still hazy from fainting, broke down and began screaming at a soldier. Something about how it was beyond his paygrade and there was nothing they could do. Marcus wasn't really listening, he was staring at the carnage when the third non-soldier approached him.

"What you think?" She queried, attempting to touch her chin before realising she was still wearing the suit.

"I think this is unlike anything I've seen before, the flesh isn't decaying despite there being no way it's receiving blood."

"That's what you're questioning? Of all things?"

"It's what I'm here to do" Marcus shrugged before heading to the soldier that wasn't being verbally abused.

Acting like he wasn't shaking in his oversized plastic suit and holding back the need to vomit, he asked,

"How exactly are we supposed to help here?"

With a stern, flat tone the man responded.

"We've been told that everything tested on the virus has been immediately adapted to in later samples no matter how isolated, we need you to find a new way to deal with the infection before it spreads." He responded, almost like a robot reading from a script.

"And what happened to the people who tested it before us?" Marcus responded tentatively "Classified" The other man responded as if on queue.

Suddenly, from behind came a woman's yell, Marcus spun around to see that the female researcher was suddenly right by one of the skin tendrils, clutching her hand to her chest, the suit around her hand had melted to her skin. She ambled over to the others, gritting her teeth in pain.

"What the hell happened?" The other soldier demanded, pushing the now silent scientist out of his way.

"I went to get a sample of that thing but it suddenly got insanely hot." She responded quickly.

"Anyone have any water?"

"You." The man yelled, pointing at the blond researcher, "front of the truck there should be some provisions, get some water."

The meeker man nodded before running to the front of the truck where he began rummaging around.

As he did so the two armed men began studying the wound as Marcus stood there stunned.

Not only was the flesh sustaining itself without blood flow but it could also react to stimuli?

And on top of this in a way regular epithelial and muscle cells couldn't. How?

Suddenly he was snapped back into the real world by a meaty crunch.

The woman was suddenly silent.

And she was stood close to the robotic soldier.

And her arm was through his stomach.

No one said anything. No one moved. They couldn't comprehend what was happening let alone try to deal with the situation.

The woman took a deep breath in, then exhaled, then they both exploded into a storm of blood, viscera, and an impossible amount of flesh, flowing out in thick vines. Marcus was knocked aside, the other soldier was not so lucky. He was enveloped by a muscular tentacle, his head and chest becoming wrapped in bloody meat and carried away with his hands clawing at his assailant in the hopes of escape. The tendrils barrelled into nearby buildings before splaying out like webbing across the structures, slamming the body of the soldier into the walls of a house. His arms no longer struggled and his legs dangled in the air. Then as quickly as it had been shattered, the silence settled over the scene once again. The two corpses stood in front of Marcus were no longer recognisable. Everything above the legs was splayed out across the small square they stood in and coated in everything belonging inside the human body.

The other man left came round from the front of the truck, he was hyperventilating and shakily clutching a bottle of water in his hand.

Marcus' mind was reeling. The virus has acted so quickly, and how had it created so much matter from two human bodies? Did it somehow control the female researcher to make her stab the soldier? If he wasn't so terrified he might have almost been excited at the chance to research this organism.

Once again his questioning was interrupted by the only other living thing in miles.

"W-w-what happened?" He asked, still shaking, his eyes not leaving the mess that was once their fellow scientist.

"I'm not sure... I think the virus got under her suit." Marcus responded, trying to sound calm for the other man's sake.

"What d-do we do now?" His eyes now left the grotesque sculpture, even if for only a second to glance at Marcus.

Marcus sighed. He looked the truck up and down. The back was sealed shut by skin and muscle, it wasn't going anywhere and there was no way to access the research material they needed to do their job.

"We get the hell out of here." He finally concluded. Before looking in the direction they had come, marked by the tire tracks that were slowly being filled in by what snow wasn't caught from the air by the webs of what was once human. With a nod of understanding from the blond man they set off through the town. It was unlikely there was a populated city nearby, but it was much more likely than surviving in this hell hole.

The walk was a silent one. Only the sound of crunching snow and heavy breathing in big suits. Not much small talk comes to one's mind after watching two people turn into bloody confetti. Marcus instead occupied his mind theorising. How could two people form so much matter like that? If he had any idea what they were dealing with beyond a rapidly adapting virus he might be able to guess. He could assume that they could horizontally adapt, considering they were able to adapt to every antimicrobial they had, similar to how bacteria gain antibiotic resistance from other bacterial cells. They couldn't do so the same way though as there's no way plasmids could travel between two completely isolated samples. None of this made sense.

Marcus felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to the other man.

"Do you hear that?" The blond man asked.

Marcus listened but all he could hear was footsteps in the snow, same as they had done for the last 30 minutes.

"What do you mean?"

"I hear a third set of footsteps..."

They both stopped. The sound of footsteps continued. Someone else was here.

The two men looked around, trying to locate the origin of the sound.

They both settled on an alleyway to their left, as the sound got louder. Slowly they inched down the alley, then stopped.

Whatever it was had passed by the alleyway in a few seconds, only giving them a short look at it. It was easily pushing seven feet tall, its arms reaching down to its knees and its legs ending in a sharp point that dug into the solid stone it stepped on. As far as Marcus could see, it had no face.

Marcus stood still as it passed, whereas the other man began breathing heavily and backed away from the creature, before stopping, and then screaming. He had long thin fingers wrapped around his neck that cut off his scream and pulled him up to where the face of the being that had grabbed him should have been. The skin split, showing rows of needle like teeth that pulsed like cilia, carefully the man was lifted into the maw, the needles pierced his skin before pulling back. The researcher was pulled back into the throat, still struggling but unable to escape as the skin began sealing back up. The resealing mouth kept close to the researchers skin until he was completely absorbed and the face was once again smooth. Marcus stayed still, staring horrified as the other man was consumed. The monster then strode away, as if nothing has happened, to join the other around the corner of the alleyway.

Once it was gone Marcus set off running. Once again following the tracks set in the snow. He knew he would probably draw attention if he kept making noise but he couldn't help it. He had to get out. He had to escape.

The virus didn't intrigue him anymore and he didn't want to ever look at those horrible tendrils again.

He just wanted to pretend this had never happened and live a normal life before this spread, there was no way they could contain this forever. Someone always slips up eventually.

As Marcus passed by meat trees and webbed up houses he began to see something ahead. It wasn't human and it wasn't a monster. It wasn't made of flesh. It was a wall. A concrete wall topped with barbed wire and manned by soldiers. He began waving in the hopes of getting attention.

"Please help, everyone's dead!" He yelled, too panicked to send a clearer message.

Then there was a loud bang.

And Marcus' stomach felt... warm.

Marcus touched his gut. His fingers were red.

Everything went dark...

He heard footsteps around him. And then a voice...

"Escape attempt prevented. Offering to be returned to the square."