

Dear Isabella

“Biofilm?”

“I asked what you wanted for dinner, not the mystery of the month. Pizza, maybe?” I watched her as she held up a small vial of liquid to the ceiling light.

“Iz... Isa... pizza?” I exhaled sharply, the day’s happenings lingering in my empty stomach.

“Yeah, pizza’s fine, no peppers,” Isabella replied abruptly, barely breaking eye contact with the vial. She turned it in the light while tapping a pen on the table.

“So, what’s biofilm?” I dreaded a long response.

“Wow, look who’s suddenly interested.”

I rolled my eyes and turned towards the door.

“No, wait,” Izzy reached out and grabbed my shoulder, turning me back around.

“Biofilm is... how do I explain this in dummy terms? It’s when bacteria form on a surface, like that slime on swimming-pool tiles. There are stages, and when it matures, it...”

I held my hand up to her face.

“No more, please. I’ve had a long day.”

Isa giggled and scribbled something onto a piece of paper. She placed the vial into a holder along with the note and looked up at me.

“This vial contains a film, but no one knows what bacteria it was originally from... dun dun duun!”

“How is that possible? You’ve got so much equipment. Surely someone knows or has identified it.”

“I think it’s alien,” she said, her voice lowering to a hush.

“Hah! Please.”

“No, no... I may have found this vial in a book in Miller’s Library,” she admitted, looking down, her voice barely above a whisper.

“WHAT?!” I took a step back.

“You know that’s restricted to professors only. You’re still an undergrad,” I said, my tone mirroring hers.

“I know, I couldn’t help it. I saw an article online about some killer bacteria from the 2020s and wanted to see if I could find a book on it... then I found this. Some pages had been carved to fit the vial... and I took it.”

“Oh. My. Goodness. You really can’t keep doing stupid things. You almost got kicked out last time.”

“But I was right. The Bunsen burners needed replacing.”

“You managed to burn down a lab in the process. How did you keep your place here?”

“Stroke of luck,” she chuckled.

“Anyway, dinner.” I grasped her arm and pulled her towards the door. I didn’t need to get mixed up in this mess.

Isabella is my best friend, my soulmate. She is a quirky, happy-go-lucky individual with such wonder in her eyes. She dreams of an advanced future filled with bio-inventions to support the struggling millions.

Following the 2035 Gredioura bacteria outbreak, billions of people succumbed to the horrors of a disease they knew nothing of. With only limited knowledge of resistant bacteria like MRSA, the downfall was inevitable: droves of the population dying, structures and systems collapsing, healthcare became non-existent, and the government... they laughed from their ivory towers. Almost forty-seven years later, society had hardly progressed. The people were still suffering from the empire’s failure, and my love, Isabella, strives to fix it.

I dare not ruin that for her.

“I’m calling it Braevikarus.”

“You what?” I struggled to speak over a mouthful of dough.

“The film. I wonder how it was collected.”

“Keep wondering.” I smiled. Watching her speak so passionately about her work was enlightening. It gave me hope. A pure, light-hearted trust in the future.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. Seeing Isabella became a rare opportunity. She barely answered my messages anymore. I couldn’t totally blame her. I was busy with projects here and there too. Still, I missed her. It had been almost two months since I’d seen her, but we’d planned for today. A picnic in the park. I saw her walk up to the picnic bench, eyes sunken and hair twisted into a matted top knot. She lifted her arm onto the bench, and I almost choked on my sandwich.

“Your hand! What the heck?” The sight was astounding. Unimaginable.

“This is why I was avoiding you.” A sorrowful look fell onto her face.

“Why didn’t you tell me? What happened? Why does it look like that?” My brain was moving faster than I could speak. Her hand was grey, the texture of concrete, her fingers thin and bony, trapped in a claw.

“I... I got that film on me. Braevikarus. Turns out it was more dangerous than I imagined. After I did some tests, I found that water was its weakness, but about nine weeks ago, I spilt a sample onto my hand, and it spread.” She closed her eyes and smiled.

“It was a close call. It could’ve been my whole arm.” She opened her eyes and looked at me. The sparkle that was once there was fading. She gazed out over the field beside us for what seemed an age.

“Can we meet again on Thursday? I want to show you something,” she uttered, her voice burdened.

“Sure. No weird stuff though.”

“Of course not.”

Later that week, I went to her laboratory, *where all the magic happens*, as she always said. I pushed open the door. It creaked loudly. My eyebrows furrowed as I took in the room. The once pristine space was now dull, grey, and rotten. The worktops were blanketed in grime. The windows opaque with dirt. The stench was suffocating. It was as if a bomb had gone off. What happened in here?

“Iz? Are you here?” My voice trembled.

“Isa? Hello?” I took a few more steps, speaking a little louder.

BANG! The door slammed shut behind me. My heart was pounding. I rushed to open it. Locked. The dizzying miasma made me stumble and fall to the floor. My hands landed in something wet. I recoiled, wiping the substance onto my clothes. Frantically scanning the room, I spotted a piece of paper. I carefully unfolded it and read:

“Dear Moon,

The skies are grey, but your light is bright. You say you’re not destined to be great, but who really knows? I appreciate you and wish you all the best. I’ll be keeping an eye on you.

Thank you for your participation.

Your dearest,

Isa.”

I looked around as my eyes began to well up. Before I knew it, the liquid beneath my fingernails started wrapping itself around my fingers. I stared in shock. Gradually, my wrists were enveloped in the numbing goop. The translucent sheen revealed the ashen leather my skin was becoming. I closed my eyes. What do I do? What can I do?

My mind raced, searching for an answer. A clue, anything. I shook my head in frustration, biting my bottom lip. My eyes fell on the glistening trail of mucus, and it clicked. Izzy said water hurts it. Water. I need water. I scrambled across the floor, trying to stand. My hands were rocks against the tiles. Forcing myself upright, I staggered forward. Where do I go?

My stagger turned into a run as I lost control of my legs. Panic rose up my throat. My forearms were engulfed. My head spun. Thoughts crashed into each other. How could I stop this? Sprinting in circles, zigzagging, there was nowhere to go. *Don’t lose hope. Not yet.*

I saw a flicker of light. A way out. My eyes locked on the glimmer of salvation. My last chance. Then, a thud. The logs that were my arms struck my temple as I hit the floor. My vision began to blur. The room spun. It was over. My stomach turned at the thought of my fate. Fear ached like nausea. My brain burned like gas.

I struggled and rolled onto my back. The last of my energy poured out of me like sand through an hourglass. I stared up at the dingy grey tiles, messily bolted to the ceiling. Rust clung to every crevice, almost like mould. Growing and spreading.

Was this really how it ended? The cold film crawled over my shoulders. The needle-like pain of the chill distracted my heart from what was to come. The warmth slipped away silently. A slow, reluctant farewell to comfort.

Imagine you're dreaming, and the alarm starts blaring. You pull the duvet tightly around yourself one last time before getting up for the day. You know you'll return to its reassurance. Now imagine the bed no longer exists. A final goodbye. Instead, a freezing floor. No one coming to help. Stuck. Surrounded.

I was surrounded by this thing. This creature. This horror. This... beauty. It twinkled so perfectly under the dim light, glimmering as it moved, showing colours, I'd never seen before. It hid its radiance. Or perhaps I was just blind to it.

My eyes closed as I sank deeper. Deeper into the abyss. The darkness engulfed me. I let out a breath. I was no longer. I was no more. This was what was to be. I couldn't have prevented it. Or maybe I could have. Why are the easiest questions to ask always the hardest to answer? When will the wonder cease? When can I be free of curiosity or regret in this case?

A drop fell from the ceiling. Then another. The violent stench of burning flesh filled the air. The sparkles that covered what I could no longer call skin turned to dust with every tear from the ceiling.

I scoffed, staring at my body sprawled on the floor. A thin, iridescent gloss barely concealed a rotting grey corpse.

This wasn't how it was meant to be.

I hate you, Isabella.

No... I hate what you've become.