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English IV

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Escape

The man’s feet slammed on the cold metal, knees buckling against the impact. Sweat ran down his cheeks and stung his eyes. Pain ran through his neck, a fresh wound seeping with blood. His hands were caked in dirt and grime. The rounded walls were fresh with slime, the rancid smell permeating throughout the corridor. Heart pumping, he started towards the entrance, the soft yellow glow only a few hundred feet in front of him.

“*Zack?* Where the *hell* are you, buddy?” A tall figure appeared out of the shadows. Long, blonde hair ran down across her shoulders, and acne scars littered her face.

Zack had known Sarah for as long as either of them could remember. They watched their first movie together, started middle school hand-in-hand, and shared their first kiss on a rainy day outside of a run-down movie theater.

Zack stopped in his tracks, paralyzed with fear. “Sarah, just leave me alone. I didn’t see *anything*, okay? I’ll forget everything, just...just *let me go.”*

“You *know* I can’t do that…” Sarah stepped closer, brandishing a knife. The red glow pulsed behind her body like a metronome.

As graduate molecular biology majors, their tools consisted of microscopes and sanitary gloves. Weapons were only a last resort, if an option at all. In this particular excursion, Zack and Sarah were finishing their first semester project, and were tasked with going out into the field and ‘finding something of interest’, to the urging of their professor. Dr. Marc Janey, an old man with a balding head and a poor disposition, had been teaching at Puyoma State for 25 years. To most of his students’ surprise, he was still fond of field work, and constantly urged his students to collect samples in the field.

This particular morning, Zack sat in the school’s library. The smell of books and stale coffee invaded his nostrils, and the evening chill crept up and down his body. Most days, the library was empty, save for the librarian named Jane Hemphry. Everyone called her Ms. H, if they bothered to talk to her at all. Today, she was sitting at her desk drinking black coffee and reading a romance novel. Zack spent most of his time in the student section on the fifth floor, surrounded by a stack of old biology textbooks, paper, and hastily scribbled notes.

Sarah slid in next to him, her flowing blonde hair tied in a ponytail. “Zack, how’s it hanging, buddy?” She picked up the textbook on the bottom of the stack, its cover coated with dust. “*Modern Molecular Biology in the Field*? What an exciting read. Is this the one I got you for Christmas last year? No, that doesn’t sound right.”

Sarah’s memory grew increasingly poor with each passing year. She had attended a psychiatric hospital at a young age, presumably from ‘unusual activity’, or so the rumors claimed. Some said she killed her childhood dog, some say she killed her parents, others swear she committed acts of murder and arson beyond the capabilities of one person. The rumors followed her everywhere, but Zack never believed them. They had been friends for nearly a decade, and he thought she was as normal as anyone else.

“No, that was a different--” Zack stopped writing and snatched the textbook out of Sarah’s hand, placing it on the floor under his chair. “Is there a specific reason that you’re here? I’m trying to prepare for the field study tomorrow.”

“You’re preparing for that right *now*?”

“Yes.”

“For Mr. Janey’s class?”

“It’s *Dr.,* and yes.”

Sarah produced a computer and a notebook and turned it towards Zack. “How about you tag along with me? I already have part of the write-up typed up. Excuse the spelling mistakes, I haven’t had time to edit it fully--”

Zack snapped his book shut. “Sarah, when did you have time to *do* this?” He was often strapped for time, and rarely finished his assignments on time, let alone early.

“Weeks ago. I had to skip class a few times, but it’s no big deal.” She reached down into her bag and put on her reading glasses, the frames much too big for her face. “I’m planning to visit the city sewers to take samples of the gross stuff that’s hidden down there.”

“That sounds great. I’ll look through the city archives. Maybe I can get a list of possible microbes cited in the area. I can also borrow a microscope and some sample bags from the supply room.” Zack was a student executive, and had nearly limitless access to the biology department’s supply cache. He had never taken advantage of the privilege until now.

“Make sure to get a knife, too. One of the big ones.”

*Why a knife?* Zack thought. “Okay...how does the courtyard sound?” The courtyard was a massive expanse of green littered with chairs, benches, and awnings covered with rust and frost. “Around noon?”

Sarah nodded and smiled.

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The supply room was at the end of a long hallway in the basement of Medical Building A. The walls had not seen disinfectant in years, and were coated in a thin layer of dirt. Most of the doors on either side of the corridor were empty, abandoned by former executives and professors. One flickering light hung on the ceiling, bathing the hallway in a warm yellow glow. The air conditioner gave an ominous whir, occasionally rattling or protruding a high screech.

Zack came upon the supply room and typed the code into the keypad to the right of the door’s single window. This particular storage room had gone untouched for years, though its contents had never been emptied. When the last curator had gotten fired for workplace misconduct, the basement of Medical Building A faded into obscurity.

The shelves of the supply room were covered in dust, but held a plethora of medical supplies and tools. In one corner, stacked boxes of small plastic sample bags. In another, dense metal shelves with microscopes, test tubes, bunsen burners, and beakers of various shapes and sizes. In the back of the room, one shelf was turned on its side, broken shards of glass and equipment sprawled all over the floor.

Zack crouched down in front of the overturned shelf. On the floor, a set of metal scalpels sat disheveled atop the glass shards. Zack reached down to grab a pair, and brought his hand back in shock. Small, red dots of blood freckled his index and middle finger.

*Is that...blood?* Zack thought. *It sure as hell isn’t mine.*

Grabbing a nearby towel to wipe off the blood, he reached further back towards the wall. Leaning against the wall, surrounded by glass, was a hunting knife, its leather hilt spotted with more blood. The metal blade was spotless and cold. “What the actual hell is going *on?”* Zack said aloud, his voice echoing throughout the small supply room. He wrapped the knife in the towel, gathered the other supplies, and left in a hurry.

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Zack pulled into the courtyard driveway just before noon. The courtyard was completely empty, save for a few stray cats. Broken chairs, trash bags, and carrion littered the freshly-cut grass, the smell of dew and lawn clippings filled the thick, humid air. A large stone fountain sat in the center, drenching the patches of dead grass below. Zack started towards the library, where Sarah was sitting on the brick steps in front of the low overhang.

“You’re *always* late, buddy! Always late.” Sarah punched Zack playfully on the shoulder. She wore light mascara and lipstick, and her hair flowed down to her breasts. She shouldered a large backpack, its strap hanging loosely over her left shoulder.

“Yes, I suppose so.” Zack chuckled nervously. He debated asking Sarah about the knife and the blood, but ultimately decided against it. Sarah knew a lot of his childhood secrets, and she never pressed further. He figured that it was only fair to do the same.

“Do you have the knife?” Sarah used her index finger to twirl her hair, the sun glittering off her beautiful, blonde curls.

“Yes,” Zack felt around for the knife in his backpack.

“Good,” Sarah unzipped her bag and pulled out a flashlight, its metal body glimmering in the sunlight. “In case it gets dark. You know, in the sewers. It gets dark in there sometimes.”

“That’s...fine.” Zack sighed.

“Did you get the microscope?”

“Yes, I found two. They had an electron and a scanning probe--”

“And the bags? We need those.”

“Yes, there were boxes upon boxes, but I managed to carry out enough for thirty or so specimens. I found evidence suggesting sufficient traces of a few pathogenic bacteria, all of which should be easily identifiable.”

Sarah jumped and started towards the back gate leading to the sewer. “Excellent! It’s only a short walk to the sewer. Follow me.”

Zack followed.

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The walk was not as short as Zack may have hoped. The afternoon sun beat down hard, and the young graduate student was covered in sweat when they reached the entrance to the sewer. Much to Zack’s distaste, the pair waded through a river fresh with algae and marched through numerous groves of pine trees and lush forests. The entrance was a large pipe ringed with moss and hanging vines. Metal bars that sealed off the entrance were cut away. The smell of sewage and sweat hung in the air.

The pair walked through the sewage for what seemed like hours, occasionally stopping to collect a sample or jot something down in their notebooks. The metal tunnel wound in every direction, and Sarah led the way through the maze of pathways and hidden corridors. Finally, they came upon a large metal door, two inches thick with a handwheel and combination locks.

Sarah stopped before the door and turned towards Zack. “Sheesh, that was a helluva walk, huh?” She ran her hands through her hair. “Here, I’ll take that knife now. It’s about time I had that.”

*I still have no clue why she needs this knife, but fine,* Zack thought. *None of my concern.* He felt around in his pack. “Well that’s odd...I can’t seem to--”

Sarah produced the knife and twirled it between her middle and ring finger. “It’s about time I got that knife. You’ve been keeping it from me for so *long.”*

The next few seconds were a blur. A blinding flash of pain seared the back of Zack’s head, and blood ran through his hair and down his neck. With one free hand, he tried to hit her, to scratch her, but he couldn’t make contact. He was too stunned to speak.

Sarah gripped Zack’s arm, pointed the knife into his back, and whispered in his ear. “I’m going to show you something, Zack. Something *cooler* that biology.” She shoved him through the door and pulled out the flashlight with her free hand.

The smell was rancid, and Zack nearly collapsed from what he saw. Three bodies were leaning on the walls of the square room, each starting to decompose. One looked to be badly burned, its skin black and the clothes that remained were torn to shreds. Its face was charred beyond recognition. The others were newer, and Zack could roughly make out their faces. They sat in pools of blood, and wounds painted their exposed flesh.

“What the...*hell?”* Zack croaked. His eyes burnt, a single tear running down his cheek. “Sarah, what are you--”

Sarah dragged the knife across the back of his neck, spilling blood in every direction. “They said it couldn’t be done. They said I couldn’t be fixed. They said that I was *crazy* or *deranged.”* Her laugh echoed throughout the small room. “But I’ve accomplished so *much.”*

“See the one on the left there, the human marshmallow? That was Zeke. He touched me in a *very* inappropriate manner last summer, so I torched him.” Sarah laughed, spit flying onto the back of Zack’s neck. “And the other two, well, they were a couple of lovebirds, and *she stole him away from me!* So now they are dead! And soon, you will be too.”

Zack mustered up enough energy to jerk his head backward, making contact with the front of the deranged student’s nose. He shoved her out of the way, threw open the door, and ran. Every step burned, and Sarah’s shrieking filled his ears. He wound his way back the way he came, trying to remember the sequence, like a mouse in a wooden maze. Left, right, another left, straight, another right.

Zack almost made it, he could see what he thought was an exit, the yellow and orange glow just around the corner. Sarah stopped him in his tracks, though, and led him around the corner towards the fiery glow. Wisps of flame crawled up the walls, their tongues licking the air. The heat was unbearable.

Sarah’s laughing filled the chamber as the flame swallowed the pair whole.