

## **Plague From the Sea**

**By Reyadh Rahaman**

Valence Vickers is in her basement, stuffing damp clothes into a dryer. She hates cleaning, but likes clean clothes. Laundry day is an exchange, time in return for warm and nice smelling fabrics. As she sniffs the dryer sheet that she is about to toss into the dryer, she pauses. Something smells off. She sniffs the sheet again and realizes that it is not the origin of the foul smell.

She turns about, following her nose until her eyes spot the producer of the stench. From a dim corner oozes green slime, reeking like the accumulated moisture from within a dumpster. Appalled, she freezes momentarily, pondering what to do. Nearby, she spots a broom. She picks it up and walked over to the slime cautiously. Standing as far as she can from the foul smelling substance, Val prods the slime. In an immediate and alarming reaction, a large hole appears in the thick puddle. The expanding of the hole creates an awful squelching sound. The puddle then rises up until it is one meter in height and begins to wobble towards Val.

She jumps back and shrieks in alarm before throwing the broom at the slime. The broom flies across the short distance like a javelin and impales the slime, though that does not deter its slow progress. The broom slides away, down the side of the viscous body and rolls towards a freezer, undamaged.

Val has her phone in hand, ready to call the police, but realizes that there is no way the cops would reach her in time. The slime, still undulating towards her, is blocking her only way out. Behind its green body she can see the light from the first floor descending the stairs. She looks around desperately for something that she could use to save herself. It is then that she spots a yellow suit on a hanger suspended from an exposed pipe. She has always used the thinner pipes in her basement as makeshift closets, but this is the first time that she is grateful for her house's out-dated architecture.

She runs to the suit and begins to undo the zipper down the front. What she holds is a chemical suit usually used by members of the hazardous materials disposal unit. This one belonged to her grandfather before he passed away. He had given it to her before his passing in hopes that it would make her want to uphold the family tradition. One that meant choosing a career in chemistry, like all of her relatives.

As she seals the suit around herself, mask included, she checks for any holes or tears, but is interrupted by the slime. It is gaining speed and is beginning to make a deep warbling sound. She shrieks at the slime again, this time throwing a nearby stool. The stool strikes the slime with a wet thud and halts the goo's movement

momentarily. Though, it is only seconds until the slime shifts the stool out of its way and continues its progress towards Val, who is now cornered in the southwest of her basement.

Without anything left to throw, she aims a kick at her bulbous attacker. As her swinging leg makes contact, it results in a strange sensation. It initially feels like kicking a solid, but after a mere second her foot begins to get sucked into the greenish mass. She tries to pull her leg out, but in the process loses her balance and falls onto her back. She hits the cement floor hard and grunts in pain.

The slimes covers her other leg and begins to make its way upward, attempting to smother her. Trapped and overpowered, she struggles to free herself, but to no avail. Soon, the slime completely engulfs her.

From within the slime Val is surprised to find that she can still see. The slime is translucent; giving everything she sees a greenish tinge. She internally thanks her late grandfather for this suit, shuddering at the thought of this horrid slime making contact with her skin. She attempts to move her limbs and is shocked to find that she can move them as if she is underwater. Without thinking she aims a punch out the top of the slime and breaches some sort of membrane. The slime wobbles before losing much of its rigidity. Seeing a chance to press her advantage, Val begins throwing more punches in all directions. With each strike, the slime loses more and more control until it reverts to a thick puddle about Val's ankles.

Even though she is already breathing heavily, she sprints to the stairs and makes her escape to the first floor. She slams the door behind her, unsure if it would even impede the undulant assailant. Sparing no time she retracts her arms into the torso of the suit and pulls out her phone. She calls the police, simply saying that there is something dangerous in her basement. When pressed about describing the danger all she can think to say is that there is some sort of chemical leaking from the northeast corner of the floor below.

It takes less than ten minutes for the police to arrive, but each second that ticks by causes Val to tense more and more. She stands guard at the door to her basement, armed with a rolling pin that she acquired from the kitchen. When a knocking sounds at her front door it causes her to jump, dropping the rolling pin onto her foot. She curses in annoyance at herself before letting the police in. Relieved to no longer be alone, she explains the situation to the two officers who exchange doubtful looks. Regardless, they investigate the basement and from the first floor Val hears gunshots and swearing.

Fearing the worst, Val peaks down the stairs, but sees that the officers are unharmed. She notices the thick, green puddle is no longer in the corner where she fought it off, but in the centre of the basement, flanked by the two cops. It does not

move, though Val notices that both cops have their guns drawn and that the barrels of each are emitting slight plumes of smoke. One of them then requests back up by speaking into their shoulder-mounted walkie-talkie.

A back up unit of four more officers arrives a short while later, along with a forensic scientist. Val continues to observe from the top of the stairs as the officers surround the slime. On occasion it attempts to move, but upon every such incidence an officer lets off a round into the fiend. The bullets seem to have enough penetrative power to disrupt the membrane from holding the slime together, making it relatively easy for the officers to contain.

During a period when the slime is inactive, the scientist gathers a sample and retreats back to the first floor to conduct a few experiments. Out of curiosity, Val follows her. She explains to the scientist, whom she learns is named Azalea, that she is familiar with many chemistry concepts due to her family's professions.

Azalea welcomes the assistance in setting up the portable lab equipment and compliments Val on the chemical suit that she is still wearing. Val blushes, realizing that she had forgotten that she was still in her grandfather's old HAZMAT garb. It's surprisingly comfortable; she says so to Azalea, who chuckles in response.

As the scientist does her job, Val watches and listens to Azalea's observations about the slime sample. The chemical make up of the slime seems to be combinations of substances that usually appear in refuse, along with a few that Azalea claims that she has never encountered before.

Val queries on how trash-fluids can become sentient and attack a person, to which Azalea shrugs. The scientist explains that they don't normally do on-site lab experiments, but such slime related activities are starting to become increasingly common in the area. So much so, that law enforcement and the local government are starting to become greatly concerned and are attempting any method they can think of to find answers.

Disturbed, Val further questions Azalea, but to no avail. The scientist has told her all that she knows, but warns Val to keep her chemical suit handy. Some of the substances found within the slime sample show traces of radioactivity and biohazardous properties. Azalea even swabs Val's suit exterior to test for dangerous residue, but there seems to be none. The material that the chemical suit is made of apparently has anti-residual properties; meaning that radioactive and toxic substances do not stick to it very well. Azalea still cautions Valence to sterilize the suit when possible, just in case.

Following the simple experiments Azalea packs up the sample and her equipment before giving a signal to the officers below that she has completed her

observations. She tells the officers that the substance is radioactive and a biohazard, so that they keep their distance. Even though all present are shaken and concerned, they keep the slime under control until the hazardous disposal unit arrives.

As the HAZMAT team enters Val's house they pause when they see her in a severely out-dated model of their own chemical suits. She briefly explains, to which the team chuckles, as Azalea did.

Val once more takes up her perch at the top of the stairs leading to the basement and watches the HAZMAT team scoop up the impotent puddle into a biohazard container and seals it. They then sanitize the basement with a number of chemicals and warn Val to stay out of the basement for the next twenty-four hours.

After everyone leaves, Val thoroughly scrubs her grandfather's suit with bleach while still wearing it. She then she sinks into a chair, exhausted and sweaty. She knows that she has to take it off eventually, but is scared to do so. She has no idea how that slime got into her basement and now distrusts all the corners and dim sections of her home.

To calm her nerves she barricades herself within her bedroom and takes a shower to relax. She scrubs her body thoroughly, remembering the horrid stench emanating from the slime. As she exits the shower and is about to get dressed, she is distraught to find that she has no clean clothes and that her laundry is trapped in the dryer in the chemically sanitized basement, which she cannot enter for a full day.

Depressed at the lack of warm, fresh garments, she flops onto her bed in nothing but a bathrobe and sobs herself into an uneasy slumber. Her tears flowed into the aether and welled inside her mind's reservoir. She dreamt of drowning in a sea of green slime, causing her to toss and turn fretfully until dawn.

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Val rises the next morning feeling like a wretched undead. She slept for ten hours, but it felt more like ten minutes. She rolls off of her bed ungracefully and lands on the floor with a thud.

Now fully awakened by the impact from her slight fall, she remembers that she has no clean clothes. She checks her phone out of habit and sees many missed calls and text messages from her boss. She looks at the time and realizes that she should have been at work two hours ago. The excitement from the night before had caused her to forget setting her alarm clock.

Desperately, she begins to rapidly search every drawer, shelf, and nook in her bedroom for anything she could wear. She just needs something to get her to the diner. When there, she knows where to get a new uniform. Hers is currently trapped in the basement until sometime around midnight tonight, along with the rest of her clothes.

In her closet, beneath a trove of books, sketchpads, and painting supplies, she finds a box. Upon the box is written 'clothes donations'. Val had intended to donate this box of old clothes months ago, but had forgotten. Thanking her past self for being absent minded, she tore open the box in a hurry. On seeing all of her options she frowned. Most were too small to fit her, many articles being from her teen years. Though she did not consider herself to be old or out of shape, she knew that her proportions were simply not the same as they were the half-decade ago that she attended high school.

Only a few things even looked relatively wearable. One was a horrendously garish neon yellow jacket covered in bright red arrows. She had bought it at a concert long ago while intoxicated and had never worn it. Another was a pair of lacy undergarments that she had accidentally won from a friend's bachelorette party game. The third, and final article that was wearable, was a pair of red and white track pants emblazoned with her former university's logo. The only reason she was donating those was because she had bought a new pair recently that she prefers to wear.

Having no other option she donned the three articles and raced off to the diner in her station wagon. As she inspected herself in the mirror she was grateful to have shortened her hair recently. It was much easier to manage. During stop signs and red lights she used her fingers to sort out the mess of red strands that covered her head.

Upon reaching the diner, now two and a half hours late, she was greeted by curious stares. There weren't too many customers, but those near the coffee bar gave her questioning looks. They were all regulars who knew her, so she smiled and waved at them before quickly disappearing into the employee entrance.

As she reached her locker and began putting on her second uniform, Greta, the manager and owner of the diner, confronted her. Greta grilled her for a few minutes before leaving Val to cool.

Thankful that all she got was an earful, Val went about her daily tasks. The rest of her day went as usual. Serving tables, cleaning tables, serving more tables. The routine of it actually made her feel better. When she left after her shift she decided to simply wear her uniform home instead of changing back into the horrid

attire that she had worn in the morning. The beige dress with apron was cute in its own, subtle way.

On the way home, though, she encountered trouble. Parallel to the road leading back to her house ran a creek of moderate size and depth. It was about two meters deep in the middle and the current never got too fast, though since her town was situated so close to the coast, it leads directly out to sea. Sometimes things came in from the sea as well, like bull sharks, seas snakes, and nesting sea turtles.

What she saw, though, was not an animal, or even the trash that sometimes appears, but another of those foul slimes. This one was a fair bit larger though, and dwarfed the fisherman that it was menacing. Frozen in shock, the angler was set upon by the green mass. It engulfed him and became motionless.

Val accelerated, passing the scene rapidly, but not intending to leave the man to his fate. She was close to home and could be back in less than five minutes. As she raced into her house she called the police and reported the situation while pulling on her grandfather's HAZMAT suit and rushing back to the rescue of the fisherman.

When she pulled up on the side of the road overlooking the slope leading down to the shore of the creek, she spotted the slimy blob. It was where she had seen it last, but as she approached, the fiend became aware of her presence. From the cavernous rear of her station wagon she pulled out an umbrella with a thin, metal point and stared down the huge, foul smelling slime. This one's scent was repugnant as well, though it smelled more of rotten fish than garbage water.

As she confronted the slime oozing towards her, up the sandy slope, she held the umbrella before herself like a samurai wielding a katana. The foul blob was translucent, like the one from her basement; therefore she was able to see within it. The fisherman that it had engulfed earlier was still in one piece, though he seemed to be unconscious and pieces of his clothes seem to be dissolving. Along with the fisherman, Val spotted fish, tin cans, sticks, and a variety of other things within the gelatinous one's body.

When it lunged slowly at her, Val stabbed it repeatedly, creating multiple breaks in the surface of its membrane. The slime falters, giving her another opening to attack. She moves quickly to its left and unleashes another series of stabs. The monster groans and suddenly collapses. Its towering mass falls like a tidal wave upon Val, knocking her to the sand and smothering her.

Like before, it feels like she is in a body of water. Realizing now is her chance to rescue the angler; she wraps her left arm around his waist and drags him to the surface of the slime's body. Val stabs outwards with her umbrella, now only held in her right hand. When the surface tension breaks she and the fisherman are spewed

out of the newly formed gap. Having lost too much structural integrity, the slime is reduced to a thick puddle.

The fisherman coughs up some goo and regains consciousness from the commotion caused by his exit from the slime. Val helps him to his feet as she keeps her eyes on the thick, green puddle. The police and paramedics arrive in time to see the slime beginning to flow down the sandy slope into the creek. It looks like gravity is hastening the fiend's involuntary retreat.

As the medics see to the angler, Val recounts the happenings to the police. This time they do not doubt her, as more and more of these occurrences are taking place. After taking a short report they receive a call about an emergency at the local grocery store. They thank Val for her time and rush off, shortly followed by the ambulance taking the fisherman to the hospital.

Val exhales, plopping down on the sandy bank near the road. She sits and stares at the creek in the fading sunlight. She wonders what is happening to her town. Monsters from the waves were something she has only read about in horror stories, not a real life threat. As light fades she heads home, her body cold from the terror she endured. She has no idea how and why she sprung to the angler's aid, but it felt right. Despite the dread and horror she felt the entire time, it made her feel invigorated.

On the drive home she wonders if that was what her grandfather felt like when he wore this very same suit. In her youth he had told her many tales of his exploits into toxic filled lakes, tanker spill clean-ups, and coastal decontaminations. When he told the tales of his companions' heroic efforts to protect the flora, fauna, and community, he often made them seem almost like fairy tales. The epic wording and hand gestures had always made them exciting.

Upon reaching her home she sterilized the chemical suit like before, scrubbing it while being worn. Afterward, she sorted out her clothing situation while cautiously scrutinizing every nook and cranny. She was dismayed to find that her clean clothes were devastated by wrinkles from having not been folded properly.

Sobbing, she began ironing and continued late into the night. She did not work the next day, so she was free to de-wrinkle as much as she pleased. At around one o'clock in the morning she began to doze off while sorting out a pair of jeans. Too tired to continue she flumped herself onto her living room couch, leaving the iron plugged in as her mind drifted off into unconsciousness. The steam rose, as did her psyche, into the realm of dreams. Floating about fog and mist, she dreamt of gliding over dark waves and darker foes.

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Sometime after sunrise screaming awakens Val. She jumps up in alarm and realizes that the screaming is coming from outside. She spares less than a minute to equip the chemical suit. Putting it on has become second nature to her. On the way out she unplugs the iron, still hot from being active all night, and takes it with her. She cannot recall where she left her umbrella and does not want to delay investigating the scream any longer, lest one of her neighbours succumbs to the threat.

Upon exiting her front door she sees the source of the commotion. There is an overturned police van on her left neighbour's driveway. One of its back doors is hanging outward, bent horribly about the frame. The other is on the driveway, having been separated from the body of the vehicle.

Between the van and her neighbour's house she sees the bodies of a few police strewn over the lawn. Her neighbour stands on their porch, screaming. From the side of the van opposite of Val oozes a hulking mass of slime. This one is larger than the one from her basement, but a fair deal smaller than the one from the creek. It stands about a meter and a half tall, though its colour is not like the others. It is not lime green, but a dark yellow, similar in shade to bile. It also moves faster, much faster. It rolls across the lawn about as fast as a human could speed-walk. Her neighbour screams even louder as the slime races towards her. She is too elderly and frail to make an escape or form a defense, so Val charges, intent on intercepting the slime before it can reach the older woman.

Moments before the slime reaches the septuagenarian, Val reaches the threat and shoves the point of the iron into the body of the gooey fiend. A violent hiss screeches forth from the contact, but the body of the blob does not lose its shape. The slime shrinks slightly as pungent yellow fumes enter the air, causing Val and the old woman to gag. It smells strongly of ammonia and low tide. Val realizes that the heat from the iron is evaporating the water in the monster's body, but her only weapon is now within the body of the beast. The hiss and sudden reaction had made Val release the iron in surprise.

The attack had caused the slime to halt in its tracks, but the heat from the iron was now fading, being cooled by the slime's wet innards. Val turned to her neighbour, instructing the elderly lady to heat up as many objects as possible. Her neighbour nods before shuffling into the house, glad to put distance between herself and the aggressive slime.

The yellow fiend begins to shake off the effects of the iron attack and now starts its counter-attack. It charges at Val, who jumps back, through the doorway leading inside the house. The slime follows her in before she can shut the door, pushing its way into the kitchen just beyond.



The elderly neighbour screams again at the sight of the yellow blob. She had turned on all burners upon the stove and has pots and pans on all four. Val thanks her before suggesting the older lady make a tactical retreat, to which her neighbour agrees. She shuffles away into the living room.

The slime emits a deep rumble, one that sounds like the jiggling of gelatin that has been amplified and pitch shifted. It rushes at Val with ill intent, but she is ready. She grabs a frying pan from the stove and smashes it upon the top of the slime, causing another hiss of disgusting yellow steam. Val holds back a retch and keeps her hand firmly grasped around her bludgeon. She delivers a few more strikes before the pan begins to grow cold. The attacks seem to shrink the slime even more.

She is about to strike it again with the lukewarm pan when the fiend suddenly launches a bulbous growth at her. Luckily, Val had the frying pan extended in front her body, so it took the hit. Though, the stickiness of the thick arm-like growth wrenches the pan from her grip, pulling it into the body of the amorphous mucus monster.

Quickly, Val grabs a pot from another corner of the stove and begins to hammer her foe with the new implement. She continues this pattern and is able to shrink the slime down to the size of a chicken. As the slime decreases in size it leaves a yellow paste on the floor, along with the objects it had previously absorbed.

Being small granted the blob increased agility and it is now able to dodge Val's attacks. In desperation, Val throws her last weapon, a skillet, at the small blob, but it dodges this as well. It then rushes straight towards her and latches onto her leg. She screams and flails her leg, trying to shake it off, but it holds fast. It then begins to squeeze, slowly cutting off circulation to her foot.

Just then, from around the corner appears Val's elderly neighbour wielding a red-hot fire poker. She tells Val to hold still, which she does, and then lances the blob as if it is a boil. The most violent hiss yet erupts from the small monster's body. Soon, nothing is left behind save a cloud of horrid yellow smoke and a smear on Val's left foot.

The two women slide down to the floor, exhausted from the battle. Val then calls emergency services, which arrive shortly. The elderly woman thanks Val profusely before being escorted into the back of an ambulance. She is not injured, but the EMTs have been instructed to bring all those who come in contact with the aggressive slimes to a medical facility for anti-radioactive and biohazardous treatment. Since Val was sealed in her chemical suit, they leave her be. Others arrive to remove the bodies of the dead police still lying upon her neighbour's front yard.

Just then, Azalea, the forensic scientist from the other day, emerges from the back of a police vehicle with a large, silver suitcase. Val greets the scientist and together with the lieutenant in charge, they go over what happened.

As Val recounts how things unfolded, Azalea sets up her testing equipment on the kitchen counter and takes samples of the yellow paste left behind by the slime. She is able to identify the paste as being a type of bacteria. Though, from a species she does not recognize.

Val asks her why and how the bacteria are involved with the slimes, but Azalea shrugs. The scientist then mentions rumours she has been hearing. Rumours about experiments the government is doing to rid the coastline of the rampant pollution. Just then the lieutenant cuts her off, stating that speculation could do more harm than good. The officer then walks off to round up the other constables. The area is being designated as the scene of an accident and is being roped off, though he indicates that emergency services are stretched thin right now and that he and his team need to assist elsewhere.

Before the scientist leaves with the police, Val asks Azalea for her phone number. She intends to learn more about this bacterium and these slimes. These amorphous foes have become too much of a threat. If the government and police cannot handle the situation, then Val will take care of it herself, she thinks. Her confidence has increased greatly over the past few days, having slayed two slimes and repelled another back into the depths. Azalea gives Val her number and promises to share any information she comes across. They bid farewell and Val leaves the clean-up crew to their business in her neighbour's abode.

Azalea had tested the residue on Val's foot and determined it to be non-radioactive and non-toxic. Apparently, the bacteria itself is not the dangerous component. Even though it was only around noon, Val feels exhausted, though she does not rest just yet. She, like before, scrubs down the suit while still wearing it. Afterwards, she takes off her chemical suit, places it close by, and plops herself back onto her couch. For the rest of the day she only moves to eat and use the bathroom. She spends hours delving through every avenue of the Internet for information about what has been going on in her town. What she finds deeply unsettles her.

That night she goes to bed with a head full of dark thoughts. Her mind fades into the dusk, along with the sun over the horizon. A putrid, yellow tide creeps and oozes over her as she cowers upon a spit of land. All around, only ammonia-laden clouds and xanthic, ichorous waves can be seen.

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The following days pass in a haze of research. Her city, and all others in the area, have been placed on lockdown in fear of the epidemic. According to the news, all major cities along the coast have been affected. Whatever the source of this pandemic is, Val is sure its origins lie out to sea.

Since her diner is considered a non-essential service, her hours have been greatly diminished. Though, this has given her plenty of time to dig up information about the army of slimes assaulting her home.

Azalea had looked into the species of the bacteria they had found at her neighbour's house and, true to her word, shared the discovery with Val. This species of bacteria was the same as the one implemented by the government in coastal garbage disposal. In the past few years, many companies have been legally allowed to dump refuse into the oceans, but that had become very bad, very quickly. Public outcry had forced the world to find a solution for this new and foolish practice. Thus, *Quisquilliae devorator* was created.

From what Val could glean from the links Azalea sent her, she discovered that this species was originally created from a few individuals of a different species of flesh eating bacteria. *Quisquilliae devorator*, mentally being dubbed 'devorators', by Val, had been a different species, but a few cells had been manipulated into something else.

The nuclei and organelles within a few cells of the bacteria had been tampered with, causing them to seek out and consume inorganic material, as oppose to the flesh of organic creatures. The successfully altered cells were cultivated and reproduced in great amounts before being released into the coastal areas afflicted with the most trash.

Val had remembered reading about the new coastal clean-up plan a few months back. From what she heard, it was apparently going well, until the past month or so when news about developments became scarce. Most simply thought it was because the project failed to yield enough results to be useful on a continental scale, but Val learned otherwise.

Azalea shares her theory with her new colleague. One that speculates that *Quisquilliae devorator* has mutated due to a foreign substance. Azalea does not claim to know what this substance is, or where it came from, but she theorizes that something in the trash dumped out to sea, or even something from the sea itself, altered the bacteria to desire flesh once more. Like it had been before being turned into a living garbage disposal.

The scientist claims to have found a recently shut down lab that was allegedly working on deploying *Quisquilliae devorator* in local waters. She asks Val if

she wants to assist with the investigation as a 'civilian consultant'. Val accepts under the condition that she be compensated financially for her services, to which Azalea agrees.

The next day Azalea, escorted by two police officers, picks Val up in an average squad car before heading to the lab. This lab was apparently a research facility that was looking into ways to increase the efficiency of the trash-eating bacteria. When they reached it though, it did not look like a high-tech laboratory. The windows and doors had been smashed asunder and was void of all life. The building itself was located in a hilly area on the edge of town, nearer to the shore than to the city or the suburbs.

Azalea and the cops look nervous, but equipped with her chemical suit Val is more confident. Prior to meeting up, Val and Azalea had discussed potential defensive implements and procedures. This involved the acquisition of defensive arms that would be effective against the devorators.

As the party of four exited the car, the officers opened the trunk to reveal an array of equipment. The two cops and Azalea donned chemical suits similar to Val's, though theirs were white instead of yellow. They also bore the crest of the city, an eel in a 'S' shape on top of an oval turquoise gemstone, on the back.

After admiring how new and sleek the suits were compared to hers, Val was given a short rundown on firearm procedure by the older officer. Earlier, he had introduced himself as Lobo Garcia, a senior constable with the Seravek Police Services. Lobo tells Val that they brought conventional firearms like pistols and shotguns, but also were able to acquire a portable flamethrower usually reserved for the emergency de-icing of roads in the winter.

He then went over their entry formation that they would be moving in after entering the building. Lobo made it very clear that she was not allowed to touch any of the weapons. Even though she was disappointed, Val agreed not to touch anything.

Instead, she was handed a riot shield and sheathed hunting knife by the younger officer. He had introduced himself as Kadeem Dun, a regular constable serving Seravek as Lobo's partner. He smiles at Val and ensures her that he and Lobo will keep her safe.

After discussing their plan and formation, the group enter through the front entrance, where the doors can be seen in splinters about the threshold. Lobo enters first, wielding the flamethrower in hand, but also equipped with a handgun for secondary use. Close behind follows Kadeem, armed with a shotgun and pistol. Two meters behind him, Val and Azalea trail while armed with riot shields and knives.

Azalea directs the group towards where she believes the refrigerated storage area is located. She believes that they may be able to find samples of *Quisquilliae devorator*. This would allow her learn how the bacteria mutated and possibly how to deal with such a threat.

As they travel inwards, Val asks why they don't have more police with them, to which Azalea tells her that things are worse than they seem in Seravek. The quarantine of the city, as well as those nearby, has resulted in people hoarding supplies like food and toilet paper. The lack of resources has resulted in people panicking and acting recklessly. Looting and robberies are becoming increasingly common, the scientist states, frowning her eyebrows in concern.

With this, in addition to the slime attacks, Val worries for the fate of her home. Before she can think more of it though, the party encounters trouble. Two human height slimes lurch into view around a corner. Val and her group are currently in a corridor, with only forward and backwards being movement options. Ahead, the devorators spot them and charge, rolling as fast as the yellow slime from the other day. These ones, though, are brown and nearby opaque. The scent that emanates from them is so putrid and powerful that some of it seeps through the masks of the companions, causing them to feel nauseous. These devorators smell of the contents one would find in an outhouse or public latrine. Val gags at the horrid stench, the worst that she has experienced in a long while.

When the slimes get within three meters, Lobo ignites them with the flamethrower, dousing them in fire. Violent hissing and a thick cloud of brown smoke then consumes the corridor, blinding the party, though their suits protect them from the worst of it.

Thinking quickly, Val stabs the wall to her right, finding that her knife plunges straight through the drywall. With the riot shield, she then bashes the spot until a hole the size of her head is made. Following suit, Azalea does the same to the wall to their left. The new, yet rugged, vents allow the brown smoke to flow out of the corridor, giving the party back their vision.

Kadeem looks back at the women and nods his thanks at them. Of the devorators nothing remains but slightly burning stains of brown upon the carpet. Lobo breathes a deep sigh of relief. He then asks Kadeem to take point, leading with the shotgun while in poorly ventilated areas seems like a smarter approach, they agree.

The four progress slowly out of the corridor and into an open office space. There are cubicles and office appliances crowding the wide room. On the other side they see a sign above a large, glass sliding door. Above the door reads 'Cold Storage'.

At Azalea's behest they begin to make their way through the office, towards the cold storage entrance.

They advance, taking out slimes as they encounter them. Kadeem and his shotgun prove very efficient in breaking the membranes of the amorphous enemies. On occasion Lobo lets off a spray of fire at devorators that try to flank them, but otherwise uses the flamethrower sparingly, lest it blind them in the middle of combat once more. Some of the slimes split apart when hit by the shotgun's slugs or shrink due to the heat of the flames. Those too small or too near to the party get taken care of by Val and Azalea. They use the riot shields to cover one another as they take turns stabbing at the smaller slimes. Their formation proves effective and allows them to cross the office space with relative ease, though they do not pause until they reach the sliding door.

Val sees a keypad on the wall beside the door and frowns before pointing it out to Azalea. The scientist scratches her chin thoughtfully before taking out a smartphone and a cable from her suit pocket. She connects the phone to a port on the keypad and begins to type furiously. She asks the other three to cover her as she electronically picks the lock.

Just then, another pair of medium-sized brown slimes approach the party from behind. Lobo and Kadeem do not hesitate to engage the foes, but as they do so a new threat appears. From the left wall, adjacent to the sliding door, an orange blob looms. It slides effortlessly, hugging the vertical surface with ease. It approaches quickly and Val notices that it is smoking. It leaves a trail of putrid pink fumes behind it, discolouring the formally beige walls. As it nears, she can smell something akin to the of burning rubber and paper.

As the officers are busy, Val engages this new slime by herself, undaunted. She feels her pulse quicken as the adrenaline begins to flow. When the slime gets within two meters of Val, it jumps off the wall, aiming its round body at the young woman. Val blocks with her riot shield, angling it upwards towards the threat. The half-meter thick slime lands on the shield with a thump. Following the thump Val hears a sizzling sound. She swings the shield downwards, tossing the orange blob against the wall once more. It then falls onto a copy machine, rocking the appliance.

Val checks her shield's exterior and sees that there is a circular burn mark upon its black metal surface. It does not seem to have affected the structural integrity of the shield, but Val becomes concerned that the orange slime could potentially burn through her suit. As she ponders what to do, the slime oozes off of the damaged copy machine, melting away some of the plastic buttons as it does so.

The small devorator then retreats up the wall, stopping about three meters up. It then looks like it is tensing its body, preparing for something. It then begins to

glow and a small flame appears on top of it. The amount of pink smoke increases, discolouring a great portion of the ceiling above. Worried that the slime is going to set fire to the whole building, she takes a gamble. Holding the knife by the blade between her thumb and index finger she winds up, aiming for the orange blob. Val then hurls her only weapon at the foe.

It spins through the air in a graceful arc before burying itself, blade first, into the flaming devorator. Val gasps before fist pumping in success. The slime, knife still embedded in its gooey body, falls from its place on the wall. During its fall, the flames go out before it plops once more onto the unfortunate copy machine. This time severely denting its already fractured form. The devorator's body goes limp, almost liquefying. The slime enters the cracks and dents in the copy machine, dying a portion of it orange.

Val approaches cautiously and finds that her knife has been melted slightly from its contact with the devorator's body. The blade is warped and no longer looks usable, though it will likely be a while before this foe can reconstitute itself.

Not long after, Azalea announces to the others that she has unlocked the door. She unplugs the cable and her phone before storing them back into her suit pocket. She stands before the door and it slides open with a pleasant beep. Val follows her as she goes through the door, trailed by Kadeem and Lobo who have just finished dealing with another pair of brown slimes. Behind them, the door slides shut and Azalea activates the security lock with a button on the wall nearby. She tells the others that this lock can be easily opened with another press of the button, in case they need to exit quickly.

The group takes a moment to breathe. Since entering the building, the team has taken down nine devorators. There does not seem to be any enemies in the storage area, but it is not lit very well. The entire room is cold and steeped in a dark blue light. Val shivers, wrapping her arms around herself.

Lobo and Kadeem both look around the room, checking for hidden threats, but they find nothing except a few frozen slimes and a dead scientist. The slimes are totally immobile, but seem to be intact. Azalea theorizes that since the devorators' bodies are comprised mostly of water, they must freeze at sub-zero temperatures. On the dead scientist they find a USB drive labeled 'Offshore Amassing'. Azalea pockets it, claiming that there is a laptop in the squad car that they drove here in.

They then look around for samples of *Quisquiliae devorator*, but find only destroyed vials and beakers. The officers have examined the body and say that he likely died from blunt force trauma to the head. There are severe bruises on the back of his head, but they say that it is possible that could have been caused by a backwards fall onto the hard tile.

Lobo says that in all the bodies that he's seen attacked by slimes, they all had chunks of their flesh dissolved or missing. He then points out that the scientist's body is fully intact. There isn't even a smudge on his lab coat. Val then puts the pieces together and realizes what the senior constable is implying.

He thinks that the scientist was murdered. Not by a devorator, but by human hands. Kadeem mentions that there also seems to be signs that someone has sabotaged the lab equipment. He points out that all of the counters are covered with broken glass and torn paper. Someone tried to make this look like a slime attack, but they were sloppy. Lobo states that it was possible whoever did this was in a rush, since they missed the USB drive.

Without anymore to examine or collect, the team prepares to leave the cold storage area and make their way back out of the building. They all agree that using the same formation as before is a good idea. The group then pauses when they see what is happening on the other side of the glass door.

All of the devorators that were not burnt asunder were melding. They oozed across the floor towards one another, forming an amorphous titan in the centre of the office space. The party gasps in horror. They are running low on ammo and fuel for the flamethrower. Not to mention Val no longer even has a weapon. As they lament their situation, the huge devorator grows even more, spanning the space from the floor to the four-meter high ceiling in a thick, multi-coloured column.

Val reckons that a devorator like that likely can't move very quickly, if past experiences have taught her anything. Slimes get faster as they shrink, but the reverse is true as well, she states logically. She then says that instead of fight, they should just give the slimy column a wide berth and flee the building. Before they can discuss the topic anymore though, they feel the building begin to shake.

The huge slime seems to be tugging at the ceiling, attempting to consume it. Fearing that the building will collapse on them, the party makes their exit. They clear the office space quickly, skirting the left wall. The slime does not even notice them as it begins eating lighting fixtures and ceiling tiles. A gooey branch of the slime column then reaches deep into the ceiling and a loud clanging is heard. The clanging is followed by a deafening crack, which shakes the whole building. As the team leaves the big room, Val spots pieces of the above floor begin to fall through the hole that the slime column has created.

They rush through the corridor and out of the building just in time. Behind them they can see the ceiling begin to cave in, shortly followed by some of the walls falling inward, which launches a great deal of dust and debris into the air. The group takes shelter behind the squad car until the gust of detritus passes.



Lobo insists that they should not stick around, as he and Kadeem hastily shove all of their weapons into the trunk of the squad car. The four then hop into the vehicle and the senior constable floors it, leaving the scene before anything else happens.

On the way back, Azalea inserts the USB into the laptop she mentioned earlier, while Kadeem and Lobo joke about their recent experience. On the USB, there is only a single text document labeled 'Offshore Amassing Data'. She opens it and begins to read the paragraph aloud.

The other three listen and become dismayed at what they hear, ceasing all jokes and laughter. The data states that there is a huge mass of amalgamated devorators approximately a kilometer out to sea from the Seravek harbour. It is so large that nearby ships, boats, and marine life get pulled towards it through the water. It has also begun to consume the water itself, bloating its body and causing a whirlpool effect around where it resides. The document also mentions that occasionally large chunks break off and make their way to shore or upriver.

Azalea hypothesizes that this is the local source of all the slimes plaguing Seravek. Unsettled, Val asks what could be done about such a fiend. Azalea replies that she does not know, and that she'll have to discuss it with her superiors.

When they drop Val back at her house, they all wish her a fond farewell and tell her to stay safe. Lobo also mentions that she should try to stay home for the foreseeable future. At least until they deal with the devorator problem, Kadeem adds. Val thanks them and wishes them luck as they drive off. She enters her house and immediately sanitizes her suit before unwinding.

As she eats dinner and watches the news, she learns more about what is happening in her town. The government has upgraded the current situation to a full-blown pandemic and is urging everyone to stay in their homes. Devorators are running rampant around the downtown sector and harbour, but there is also activity in areas located near rivers and creeks connected to the sea. The footage she sees shocks Val, it is very familiar to her recent experiences. People are being mobbed by small slimes in the streets and upon the docks. Large globs of dark blue consume yachts and boats moored in place. People screaming and running. Val shudders before turning off the TV.

She goes to bed with a heavy heart, wondering how much longer things will stay like this. She misses spending time with her family and friends, and even her job. As she tries to brainstorm potential solutions, she drifts off to sleep. Her thoughts leak into her dreams and dyes them many strange colours. Vivid images of rainbow whirlpools swallow her mind and she is lost in dream until the next morning.

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Val awakens to total silence. She had not set her alarm, as there is no need to do so these days. There are no birds singing, no sounds of cars driving by outside, not even any noise from crickets or cicadas. It is eerie, as if the world is holding its breath. She gets out of bed and gets dressed. She sees her faithful chemical suit sitting on the dresser nearby. She contemplates putting it on despite having no current need to do so.

As she stands in her room she notices the screen of her phone light up. It is a text message from Azalea, but when Val reads it her blood runs cold. Azalea tells her that there is little time to explain and that someone is after her, and might also be after Val as well. Before Val can reply she hears a loud knocking at her door.

By instinct, she quickly puts on her chemical suit before walking to the door. She peeks through the small peephole and sees a man in a black suit standing upon her porch. She cracks open a nearby window and asks the man what he wants.

He says that he is from the federal bureau of intelligence and wishes to speak with her about recent happenings in Seravek. He flashes his badge, but Val does not get a good look. She agrees to speak with the agent, but through the window.

The man sighs before seemingly speaking into a microphone on his collar. Just then, a loud crack comes from the back of Val's house, followed by many footsteps. She whirls around and is confronted by three armed individuals, all dressed in black tactical gear from head to toe. Their faces are completely covered, making it impossible to gauge their intent through expression. Each also holds a pistol, which they point threateningly at Val.

She freezes, not knowing what else to do. One of her assailants then grabs her by the arm and pin her against the window that she was previously speaking through. Another one then presses a cloth covered in a foul smelling liquid up to her nose and mouth. Within a second Val loses consciousness.

When she wakes up the first thing she notices is the smell of the sea. She opens her eyes and is greeted by blue waves as far as the eye can see. She feels them rocking the vessel gently below her. She feels a hard surface beneath her hands and feet. Val stands up and takes in her surroundings groggily.

She is on board a battleship off the coast of Seravek. She had gone fishing and sailing in these waters many times in the past and recognizes the scenery. In the distance she can make out Seravek's harbour, but much closer is a far more attention grabbing sight.

About fifty meters away, a revolting monstrosity assaults her senses. There, in the sea, swelled a devorator of massive proportions. It was over twenty meters in diameter and shone in every possible colour Val could mentally conceive. It was like the rainbow that appears in spilt gasoline. Even though the sight was horrifically vibrant, the scent was not. The offshore amassing, as this undoubtedly was, reeks of death. The scent of rotting flesh, waterlogged filth, and spilt fuel fills the air. From this distance, Val spots the torn and bloody remains of porpoises and whales, in addition to various pieces of wreckage from ships and boats within the monster's gelatinous body.

Val covers her mouth in horror, noticing that she is still wearing her chemical suit. She jumps as a voice then addresses her from behind. She whirls around to find Azalea, accompanied by two sailors and an older gentleman in a heavily decorated navy uniform. Azalea apologizes for the cryptic text she sent earlier. The military apparently thought that they had destroyed the cold storage lab, temporarily branding them as terrorists. Azalea then explains that she has clarified what really happened to the facility, but only after she and Val were both brought offshore to be questioned.

The older gentleman introduces himself as admiral Zemo Finn. He also apologizes, but for the way his sailors and the FBI agent treated her. He then proceeds to tell her of why she was brought here. He faces towards the colossal devorator in the water and approaches the railing, resting his hands on it. As he speaks, his bushy, white moustache rustles in the wind.

He says that he is not at liberty to explain the full situation to her, and thanks her for all that she has done to help the citizens of Seravek. As a reward for serving the people of her city, he has suggested that she be allowed to see the demise of the threat to her home. Val and Azalea also approach the railing to stare at the horrid fiend surrounded by swirling waves.

Finn goes on to say that they are soon to bombard the offshore amassing with both of their portside cannons. He points a hand towards the front of the ship, indicating the huge barrels trained on the devorator in the water. He states that each cannon fires rounds larger than their heads and that nothing can withstand multiple direct shots from them.

Val and Azalea stare in awe at the armaments. Azalea then asks the admiral how loud they are. He chuckles before signalling at the accompanying sailors to hand the women some earplugs. He advises that they put them in as he gives the go-ahead to begin the bombardment.

They do so and then watch the offshore amassing with baited breath. Soon, they hear a sailor shout before a loud explosion assaults their ears. In the distance the massive round hits its target dead centre. It pierces the fiend's membrane, causing an eruption of semi-digested material and slime from the gaping hole.

Within seconds the other cannon fires and has a similar result. The massive devorator seems to deflate as it loses liquid. A monstrous groan then reverberates through the air, which Azalea theorizes is the gas escaping from the wounds.

Admiral Finn then signals for the sailors to enter the next stage of the attack. Armed boats then appear from around the front of the battleship and they seem to be carrying armed, chemical suit clad personnel and large metal barrels. Finn explains that they are going to contain segments of the offshore amassing in these containers before dumping them into an incinerator.

Val nods to the wisdom of this approach. She elaborates by saying she has used tactics like these in the past, but just on a much smaller scale. Azalea concurs, raising a few key points of past dealings with the devorators.

The admiral smiles knowingly, though does not respond immediately. He looks out to sea, watching his sailors capture bits and pieces of the slimy foe. He says that after the clean up crew has completed their mission he will ensure that Val and Azalea get home safely.

True to his word, the admiral sends the ladies off in a helicopter shortly following a successful capture mission. During the flight, they discuss what they have seen. Val cheers at the defeat of the threat to their home, but Azalea seems a bit shaken by the ordeal. Val encourages her leave the past behind. When they land at the small airport on the outskirts of town, there are two cars waiting for them. Val and Azalea part ways fondly, bidding each other safe travels.

After reaching home, Val can feel the exhaustion creep up on her, though she immediately checks her back door. It is mostly undamaged, but the doorknob lies on the floor a few meters away. Apparently, the team that abducted her smashed it in to gain entry to her house. She sighs before carefully jamming the knob back into its rightful place. She then closes the door and grimaces. It will prevent the entry of animals, but any human would be able to tell that the lock is clearly busted. She then moves her couch in front of the door, making it much more difficult for potential intruders to open it. It's not perfect, she admits aloud to herself, but it will do.

She spends some time cleaning her chemical suit, even though there has been no recent direct contact with any devorators. When she is finished she notices that

the sun is already going down. She realizes that she must have been unconscious for much longer than she initially thought, though she still feels tired.

Val then takes a shower and promptly goes to bed. This night she sleeps sounder than any in recent memory. She dreams of azure waves and cyan skies. Calm waters; clear and beautiful. Floating, carefree, in a blue expanse.

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In the following days, Val feels her heart lighten. Though still in a state of quarantine, Seravek slowly awakens from its slumber. Everything had been shut down for so long that people were becoming worried about the economy. The devorator attacks had decreased exponentially, before ceasing altogether merely three days after the offshore amassing was contained and incinerated.

Within the following week, businesses began to opening up once more, including the diner that Val worked at. She returned gladly, greeting her co-workers and the regulars warmly upon her first day back.

In the downtime, when she wasn't fighting devorators, she had done quite a bit of painting. She had stocked up on art supplies before the quarantine, so she was able to create many new pieces. The best of which she brought to the diner to decorate the interior. Her fellow staff and the regulars all stated that they loved her paintings, claiming they made the diner more interesting.

Upon closing one evening, she paused and gazed at her favourite piece. It depicts the multi-coloured amalgamation of the devorators she, Azalea, and the two constables encountered not that long ago. She had even painted the silhouettes of her party near the bottom, looking at the vibrant horror before them.

Val was keeping in contact with everyone that she had fought alongside and saved during the devorator epidemic. She saw her neighbour and the fisherman she saved everyday on the way home from work. The fisherman was still angling in the spot at the same creek, and often would flag her down to share some of his fresh catch with her. Her neighbour, equally generous, would constantly gift her with baked goods. Between the two, she rarely had to do any shopping and saved up quite a bit of money. This, in combination with successfully selling many of her paintings, allowed her get enough money to enrol into the Seravek Hazardous Material Disposal course. This program would allow her to join other HAZMAT disposal technicians in the field and save lives.

Azalea, Lobo, and Kadeem had inspired her. All of who worked daily to make Seravek a better place. It made her want to do the same. Just like her grandfather, who had left her the suit she now held dearer to her heart than any other article of

clothing. Working at the diner and simultaneously doing the HAZMAT course was tough, but her new friends often visited her during work to say hello and offer her encouragement. In return she often gave them complementary, and secret, pastries.

Upon completing the course she threw a party at her house, inviting all those who were important to her. They ate and drank merrily into the night. Discussing, dancing, and gaming until early in the morning.

Val began working as a HAZMAT disposal technician shortly after completing the month-long course. She bade a fond farewell to the diner, but an even fonder hello to her new career in saving lives. It was not an easy job, but it was deeply rewarding. Her adventures into the most dangerous of situations thrilled her, yet nothing gave her as great a rush as when she was fighting for her life against flesh-hungry slime monsters.

Every night, she returned home worn, but completely satisfied. Though she often reflected on her past struggles, they did not dwell in her mind like dark shadows. They were merely glimpses into the past. She thought of them as adventurous exploits that she would tell to her children and grandchildren one day. When going to sleep, she had the recurring peaceful dream of azure waves and cyan skies. Of a calm, soothing, beautiful expanse of gentle currents. Of floating, carefree, upon the sea.