

Natural Predators



By Rami Ungar

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“...and that’s what we need to realize. Mankind was never at the top of any food chain. Rather, we’re just part of a cyclical link of predators eating prey and then becoming prey themselves. And microbes are our natural predators. Bacteria and viruses kill us as they use us to reproduce. And science may have given us ways to fight back against some of the more common microbial predators, but there are always new ones just waiting to feast upon us. We got that with Ebola, with HIV, with COVID, and now with this MVEC cropping up.” The scientist on the radio, who sounded more like a philosopher with the way he’d been speaking, laughed humorlessly. “Mother Nature is a bitch that way, I guess.”

Lucy couldn’t take anymore. She crossed the length of the cabin and turned off Monica Barr’s radio. Before Monica could protest, Lucy spun around and shouted, “Why can’t you listen to music like normal people do?” She then stormed out of the cabin and onto the porch, where she sat on the stairs with a huff.

Immediately she regretted freaking out at Monica like that and promised to apologize to her later. But what was she supposed to do? Monica always had her portable radio tuned to news and talk stations, and for the past week all the stations had been talking about was a new virus the scientists were already calling the MVEC virus.

With another huff, Lucy glanced around Camp Wymott’s central field. On every cabin porch, campers sat and did nothing but mope. Well, mope and watch each other, their eyes

studying their peers for odd tremors or movements in their limbs. That was usually the first sign of MVEC.

Where are the counselors? Lucy wondered morosely. *You'd think they would be out here keeping us calm and trying to cheer us up.*

But she knew where they were: they were holed up in the administrative building with Mr. Waldon, the camp director. A bunch of college and grad students trying to earn a few bucks for the summer, looking to one guy with a degree in developmental psychology for guidance. Trying to figure out how to move forward this summer when what was to be the latest international pandemic was cropping up in New York even now.

Lucy shook her head. As much as she didn't want to focus on MVEC right now, her mind kept coming back to it like a toy train on a circular track.

They had first heard of MVEC three weeks ago, during the second week of camp. Parents often sent emails to their kids rather than regular letters, even though smartphones weren't allowed at camp. Instead, the counselors printed out the emails at the administrative building before giving them to the campers. And several parents had made mention of some new viral infection popping up in Nova Scotia in Canada.

Lucy's own mother had brought it up in her email, before assuring her daughter that it was nothing to worry about. "Nova Scotia is so far away from where you are now, and I'm sure the Canadians will keep this thing contained. They're pretty competent up there."

And so, Lucy had stopped thinking about it. But then the next week's emails had all said that the new disease had shown up in Maine, just over the border from Nova Scotia. There were still assurances that the kids had nothing to worry about, but there was now a decent tinge of

worry in the subtext of the emails. Worry that, from the way many kids started making dumb jokes about getting ready for quarantine again, was as infectious as the virus itself.

And then last week, Monica's radio had been blaring news about the new virus, which the scientists were now calling mutative viral encephalopathic chorea, or MVEC. It had moved through Maine and into New Hampshire and Vermont. Symptoms included inability to control your limbs; scaly rashes on the skin; incontinence; progressive aphasia; and finally, fever, after which it was likely you were going to die.

Of course, boys and girls increased their quarantine jokes. Ray Schroeder kept them all in stitches with plenty of bathroom humor around the incontinence symptoms. However, nobody spoke about the progressive aphasia, let alone made jokes about it. Imagine losing your ability to speak over time! None of them knew a disease like that, and it went without saying that they were frightened.

And then there was the death rate. According to some experts studying the disease, MVEC could prove deadlier than COVID-19 had four years earlier. Anyone with or who knew someone with suspected symptoms was encouraged to call their nearest hospital and get checked out straightaway, lest they spread it to everyone around them. Of course, by the time you got to the hospital, it was likely anyone you encountered would have been infected as well. Not that anyone said it aloud.

Three days ago, the first cases appeared in Massachusetts and New York. And Camp Wymott was deep within Upstate New York, not too far from the Canadian border, where MVEC was also spreading like wildfire. That meant the disease could approach the camp from two different directions, depending on how bad their luck was.

That was when the low hum of anxiety and fear among the campers, as well as the normally brave-faced counselors, became an all-consuming, never-ending feedback whine.

With a groan, Lucy stood and started stomping away from the cabin. She'd take one of the hiking trails and clear her head a bit. She always felt better when she took a walk in the woods. She could lose herself among the trees and imagine she was journeying through the Fangorn Forest with the Ents, having amazing adventures with swords and sorcery.

It would be better than her current reality, anyway.

She started off towards the woods and the hiking trails, a new pep in her step as she put distance between her and the depressive mood behind her. She got about twenty paces from the cabins before a siren rang through the air.

There were several different sirens that the campers were taught at the beginning of summer, as well as what to do if they heard them. This one was for bear sightings, in which case they should return to their cabin or get inside the nearest building until the all-clear was given. Resigned, Lucy headed back to her cabin just before Monica locked it up. Her mood perked immediately as she saw who was trapped in the cabin with them.

Callie Olivetti had a round face and a blonde bob that was real cute. Plus, she was really nice. Lucy enjoyed spending time with her and, while she still thought of herself as probably straight, could not deny that she thought it would be nice to kiss Callie. Whether or not Callie felt the same way was uncertain, but Lucy was happy when she broke away from the other girls to talk to her. Especially since this wasn't even Callie's cabin. Hers was two buildings over.

"So," Callie began, "on top of the bear and everything else, is there any other crap life can throw our way right now?"

Lucy laughed despite how little she felt like laughing and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “I was thinking a sea monster could rise out of the lake. Maybe pull the dining hall in and force us to order in pizza.”

Callie giggled. “Sounds good. What do you like on your pizza? I’m a bacon kind of girl.”

They talked for a little while, the wail of the siren and the hubbub of whispering teen girls fading into the background. With someone else to make light of the situation, Lucy felt herself relax a little. That was, until one of the other girls in the cabin shouted, “I see police lights!”

Intrigued by this new development, all the girls fell silent and gathered around the cabin’s front window, which had a great view of both the field and the boys’ cabins. Beyond that was a copse of trees, and beyond that was a sloping hill which eventually ended in the entrance to the camp. And sure enough, just barely visible beyond the trees, were flashing red and blue lights. The lights bounced off the roots and trunks of the trees, making it appear like someone was playing with multicolored glowsticks at the very end of the copse.

“Why would the cops need to come for a bear?” Monica asked.

“It could be an ambulance,” Tina Pendleton suggested. “Maybe the bear mauled someone.”

“Nah, the ambulances in this area have white and orange lights,” Annie Berkshires replied. “My uncle’s a paramedic in town. He told me about it. Those are definitely police lights.”

“Then why would the police show up for a bear sighting?” Callie asked. “Wouldn’t some nature agency show up if a bear was involved?”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll be over soon,” said Monica, pushing her glasses up her nose. “These bear sightings never last that long. The last one was—what? Not even ten minutes! This one’s already due to end.”

The other girls agreed, and they fell to talking about other things. This gave Lucy a chance to apologize to Monica, and the latter joined her and Callie as they made jokes and waited for the all-clear to be given.

Except the all-clear never came. As the day continued, the bear siren continued blaring, and the number of flashing lights continued to grow. After a while, cops started fanning out around the camp. Both curious and freaked, some of the campers tried to step outside their cabins and ask what was going on. They were told, in very harsh terms, to stay inside and not to come out until they were told to do so.

Hours passed. In the cabin, girls ran out of things to discuss. With no idea of what was going on and no counselors to attempt to reassure them, they went to bed early, or buried their noses in books, or put in earbuds. Wherever they could go to try and cope with what was happening. Lucy took Callie to her bed and let her play on her Nintendo Switch while she read a YA thriller. On another day, she might’ve found this companionship pleasant, but her joy was lost under the pall of unease permeating throughout the bunk.

Dinner time passed, and finally it got dark outside. The only lights came from the floodlights over the dirt paths and the police cars by the entrance, which at this point made it look like a silent rave was in full swing in the trees.

Eventually, around ten or so, the police lights died down and the bear siren cut out. The counselors soon showed up and started ushering girls from other cabins out and back to their

own cabins. Lucy got her Switch back and hugged Callie goodbye before the other girl headed back to her bunk. The campers were then sent to bed, even though none of them had had dinner and some needed to take medication before going to sleep.

The whole time, neither Meg nor Susie, the counselors in charge of Lucy's cabin, explained what was going on or why they'd been cooped up in their bunks this whole time. If she had to guess, Lucy thought that the counselors didn't want to worry them.

Even so, Lucy and the other girls went to bed worried. Whatever happened, something about today's bear incident hadn't been normal. And these days, anything abnormal was something to be weary of.

"You don't actually believe that bull about the bear, do you?"

It was all they could talk about the next morning. Before breakfast, Mr. Waldon had announced to the entire camp that a hungry grizzly had attacked the grocery truck as it came by to drop off that week's food supply. He'd assured them that the driver was fine, as well as their food supply, but the incident was serious enough that the local police had been called to Wymott to make sure the camp was safe.

He also informed them that a decision regarding the future of that summer's session at Camp Wymott would be made later that day. In the meantime, activities for that day were cancelled, and all campers should be ready in case they were to be sent home.

In truth, Lucy didn't believe anything Mr. Waldon had said. If a bear had really been the problem, some nature and wildlife agency would have come out to the camp, like Callie had

said. And even if police were supposed to be summoned, the way they'd acted all throughout the day had been too strange. More like a manhunt on TV than people dealing with a bear problem.

However, Lucy was sitting next to Meg this morning, and Meg was giving everyone who was questioning the official line a death glare. So instead of talking about her misgivings, she stayed quiet and listened to the gossip from the other tables. Apparently, the counselors at the other tables had no trouble with their charges speculating, because Lucy heard all sorts of rumors and factoids from her fellow teens and preteens.

"I heard Ross talking with that pretty counselor for the eighth graders. The one with the nose ring? He says the police weren't sure if they were looking for a bear, a person, or the monster out of that old movie *Alien*. The truck was pretty beat up, and the driver was even worse!"

"MVEC's reached the nearby towns. I bet the cops were trying to hunt down someone with it. They didn't want anyone with the disease getting too close to the campers."

"Hey, has anyone seen my cousin Angela? If she's out hooking up with Paul right now of all times, I'm going to kick both their asses."

Suddenly not hungry anymore, Lucy pushed her bowl of cereal away and waited for cleanup to begin. When the tables were finally cleared and the campers were dismissed, Lucy headed straight for the woods and the hiking trails. Technically, she wasn't supposed to go anywhere beyond the cabins, the dining hall and some of the sport courts. But she needed to get out and be one with nature for a little while. And who was going to miss her?

As she slipped unnoticed towards the woods, she felt her excitement rise. Unable to stop herself, she ran along the hiking trail until she was too far to be seen from the cabins. Finally, she was free.

Her inner Zen restoring itself, Lucy set off deeper into the woods. With every step, she let her senses wander, listening to the chirp of birds, smelling the strong, musky odors around her, and feeling each and every tree with the tips of her fingers as she passed. And as usual when she allowed herself to fully enjoy nature, she let her mind wander to Middle Earth, which she had been obsessed with since she was seven. No longer was she a camper, but a warrior from Gondor, or a hobbit from the Shire, or an elven hunter from Lothlorien, and these were her woods. She had known them for years, known their wondrous beauty and terrible savagery. And as she wandered, she became aware of something stalking her. Something dangerous, and in service to something even more dangerous. She pulled an arrow from her quiver and readied her bow—

A twig snapped. Lucy was thrown out of her thoughts and nearly stumbled as she turned around, trying to locate the source of the noise. Just a moment ago, she could have sworn she'd been alone. Who was with her now? A counselor come looking for her? A bear? Or the monster she'd just imagined stalking her, somehow made real by her thoughts? She waited, the hairs on the back of her neck raised to full attention.

“Hey Lucy!”

Lucy screamed and spun around. Standing a few yards away was a dark-haired boy with glasses wearing a yellow tee and a tartan kilt, a rectangular box of soda cans under each arm. She relaxed. It was only Colton Gailbrath from Boys Cabin 1.

“Jesus Christ, Colton.” She laughed as Colton closed the gap between them. “You just about gave me a heart attack!”

“Sorry about that,” he replied. “What are you up to?”

“Just out for a walk. Figured I’d get one in before they decide whether or not to send us home for the summer. What are you up to?”

“I’m heading to a party.” He hefted the boxes under his arms and the cans clinked softly against each other.

“A party?” Lucy repeated.

Colton nodded and explained, “Johann in the kitchens said they likely wouldn’t be using the rest of their stock, so he was willing to give us the rest for some cash. We pooled our money and now we’re just sneaking over to Pride Rock. One at a time, so the counselors don’t notice us. We’ll have some snacks and drinks and say goodbye to Wymott for the summer.”

So even the kitchen staff thought they weren’t going to see the end of the summer. Even so, Lucy put on a smile and said, “So, that’s why you’re wearing your kilt. It’s for the party.”

Colton, who was fiercely proud of his Scottish heritage and only brought out the kilt for special occasions, nodded again. Then he said, “You’re welcome to join us, by the way. The more the merrier, after all.”

Lucy didn’t even hesitate. If even the kitchen staff were preparing to be laid off, she might as well have one last bash while she could. She took one of the boxes from Colton and said, “Lead the way.”

They walked deeper into the woods, speaking little until they reached Pride Rock. Like its name suggested, the stone outcropping looked a lot like the giant rock formation in *The Lion King*, and on a normal day, it was a good spot for people to hang out or hook up. Today though, twenty kids from across grades were hanging around the rock outcropping and listening to music on someone's device. Hot dogs roasted over a makeshift fire, and bottled waters and soda cans were downed as teens laughed. A bit off to the side, a few kids were saying teary goodbyes to their summer flings and making out as if there was no tomorrow and no onlookers.

"Colton! Lucy!" Ray Schroeder raised a hand in greeting. "You're just in time. The hot dogs are just about ready!"

Lucy, who had barely eaten anything for breakfast, realized just how hungry she was. She took a hot dog and bun, slathered some ketchup on it, and took a big chomp out of it before sitting on the logs around the fire. Colton, who took a hot dog with mustard and relish, sat beside her and handed her a soda. They clinked their cans together in a toast, officially joining the celebration.

Several enjoyable hours passed. Lucy stuffed her belly with hot dogs, chips and soda while talking and laughing with everyone. They talked about school, funny memories, things they wanted to do next summer, which counselors were hot for one another, and which were definitely hooking up after lights out. Callie came about a half hour after Colton and Lucy did, and sat down next to Lucy, causing her heart to beat. People came and went as they pleased. Sometimes they would arrive and leave alone or in small groups. When two campers arrived after obviously just hooking up or left to do so, a chorus of hollers and whoops would arise from the party.

And all the whooping and hollering was making Lucy curious. If she asked Callie...well, it was 2025. It was totally fine to feel this way for another girl. It didn't mean her sexuality had to be defined one way or another. But did Callie feel the same way? Well, she was still sitting next to her on this log. So maybe—

“Hey Callie, what's with your hand?” Annie Berkshires asked.

The clamor around the campfire fell slightly as all eyes focused on Callie. One hand held a half-eaten hot dog in its grip. The other was free, but was shaking back and forth like a bobblehead on a car dashboard. Lucy's eyes went wide, as did Callie's.

“Oh, it's just a normal hand tremor,” she assured them. “It runs in the family. My cousin in Minnesota has it too. Writing is a bitch for us!”

Even as she said it, however, Lucy could tell that no one believed her. Hell, even she didn't believe her. After all, if she really had a hand tremor, wouldn't she have said something to everyone else when the symptoms of MVEC had become known? Just so nobody would mistake it for something more serious?

MVEC. They had all gone out of their way not to mention it during the party. As if there was an unspoken agreement among them not to mention it, lest reality break the party up and ruin the mood. And yet, right here and now, was a reminder of the growing threat.

Without thinking, Lucy withdrew her hand, which had been near the one Callie was using to hold her hot dog, and wiped her hand on her shirt, as if she could get rid of any possible infection that way. Callie turned to her with hurt eyes, and immediately Lucy felt bad. At the same time, though, how could she be sure that the other girl wasn't infected? Nobody was really sure yet just how this virus spread or how fast, just that it did.

And yet...

At that moment, two of the teens who had gone off to hook up ran towards the party, shirts missing and eyes wide. “Everybody! For the love of shit, run!”

Everyone stood, dropping their food and drinks as a bolt of tension zapped through the party like electricity. They could tell this was no prank.

“What’s going on?” Ray asked.

“It’s the military!” one of the teens shouted. “They’re shooting up the whole camp! There was an MVEC infection! Now they’re making sure anyone who could have been infected doesn’t spread it!”

“Bullshit!” someone replied.

“It’s true!” the second teen yelled. “We just got away from a couple soldiers. They—!”

Several loud cracks pierced the air. Both teens shook and jittered as if tased, blood bursting forth from their abdomens like geysers. They fell over, large holes marring their backs like craters.

For a moment, there was silence as the party of campers stared in shock and horror at their murdered comrades. Then they looked up. Standing about a hundred yards away were three soldiers in tactical gear and gas masks, machine guns raised towards them.

Lucy didn’t even hesitate. She turned, grabbed Callie’s hand as it dropped the hot dog, and started sprinting as Ray and Colton shouted, “Run!”

At once, teens scattered in all directions, screaming as the soldiers opened fire on them. Lucy didn’t stop to check who had been shot or who was running alongside her. She just kept her

hand on Callie's and continued forward, too afraid to stop or look back. She was sure if she did, they would all end up dead.

When Lucy and Callie finally grew too tired to keep running, the sun was in the western sky and the shadows were growing. They slowed to a jog, then to a brisk walk, and then finally to a crawl. Still, they refused to stop except to use the bathroom, and even then only when they couldn't hold it anymore. The sounds of the gunshots and of their friends being murdered were still echoing in their ears, spurring them on despite their fatigue.

Then suddenly, Callie stopped. Still holding her hand, Lucy nearly stumbled as her arm was pulled backward. Turning around, she opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, but then followed Callie's gaze. Her eyes widened. Not fifty yards away was a small cabin. It looked like it had been built when Lincoln was a kid and had since become a drug den, but it was there, and it looked somewhat secure. And they were both very tired.

They made their way to the cabin and slipped through an open doorway that had probably once held sliding glass doors. As they stepped over the threshold, however, a voice called out to them.

"Lucy? Callie? Is that you?"

Both girls covered their mouths to suppress screams and turned in the direction of the voices. Sitting in a circle, cloaked in shadow, were eight kids. Colton Gailbrath, Ray Schroeder, Annie Berkshires, Monica Barr, and a few others whom Lucy knew by sight, if not by name. They were all dirty, sweaty, and terrified.

And, as she noted with horror, many of them had twitching or shaking limbs. A few even had dark patches around their groins.

Lucy took a step back and glanced at Callie, whose hand she had not let go of in several hours. Not even when they'd had to use the bathroom and had to lower their shorts, which had not been an easy feat. She turned to Callie, ready to tell her to run. To her horror, Callie's free hand and arm were shaking horribly, more than any simple tremor could cause. Not only that, but there was a patch of scaly skin rising up her neck from underneath her collar.

Even worse, Lucy's own hands and arms were shaking, even as her fingers held tightly onto Callie's. When did that happen?

She glanced back at the circle of campers, their hands and limbs shaking. In addition to the fear on their faces, there was also a sad resignation.

This isn't a drug den, she thought. This is a house for lepers. And we belong here.

Glancing at each other, Lucy and Callie joined the circle of sick campers.

It was a while before anyone spoke. Finally, when the sun had fully set and everything outside was black, someone spoke. "Who do you think we got this from?"

"From Callie," Monica said. "She was twitching at the party."

"I told you, that was a hand tremor," Callie shot back. "They run in my family."

"It could have come in with the cops," Lucy suggested, suppressing her anger at Monica as she gently squeezed Callie's fingers. "Who knows what's going on outside of camp? Perhaps one of them was carrying and wasn't sick yet."

"Maybe...the bear that showed up yesterday. That's why...oh God, what's the word?"

“I bet it was the government. They’re experimenting on us in order to unleash a plague they can use to cause chaos and then seize control. Today’s troops were training for the actual takeover. Which is why my daddy keeps an AK-47 in his house.”

“Pointless!”

Everyone stopped talking as Ray raised his voice and glanced at him. He was breathing hard, and it was clear he was struggling to put out each and every word. No doubt about it, he was deep into the aphasia stage of MVEC.

“Pointless...fingers. Gotta...stick...together. Or...soldiers.”

He fell silent, but everyone grasped his meaning. *It’s pointless to point fingers at potential culprits. Right now, we have to stick together. Or the soldiers will kill us to keep us from spreading the disease.*

“Why were the soldiers trying to shoot us, anyway?” asked Annie. “We didn’t know we were sick. How did they know we were sick? Did Walden call them?”

“And who brought it in?” asked another camper. “Except for the grocery truck, we never get visitors.”

“Was it...on wind?”

“It was the bear,” said a second camper. All eyes turned to him as he continued, “I overheard Walden talking to that counselor Meg. I think they’re secretly dating, they were all over each other while they talked. Or they *were* dating. They’re probably both dead now. Anyway, he said that the bear that attacked the grocery truck and the driver might not have been

a bear. It might've been someone with MVEC. That stuff doesn't just spread fast, apparently. It makes you go crazy."

"Go crazy?" asked Colton. "Like in that movie with the rage virus?"

The camper shrugged and replied, "Maybe."

"But that truck was ripped up like Wolverine had been at it!" a third camper said. "I know! I snuck out after lights out last night and saw it getting towed away. Nobody could do that, no matter how crazy they were. And no bear could do that either."

At that moment, gunshots rang out from a distance. All ten teens froze, waiting to hear if any more shooting would occur. When none did, Colton cleared his throat, glanced at the kid who had overheard Walden and Meg, and said, "Well, if you're right, then I can see why the military would be called. If this thing spreads so fast and makes people crazy, then they would want to contain it and make sure no one spreads it. Hell, if it does make people crazy, that might be why it's spreading so fast. People are losing their minds and passing MVEC along like rabid dogs."

"Whatever...not help us," Ray countered. "Come on. Sleep. Basement. Tomorrow...decide next."

They were all tired, so they agreed without argument. Standing on shaky legs, they walked to a door that led to a basement. With the help of the more able-bodied members, all ten of them got downstairs and were able lie down. To their delight, there was enough room for them to spread out a little and not bump up against anyone with spastic arms and legs or soiled pants.

Even with the extra room, however, Lucy and Callie still wordlessly chose to lay down beside one another in the corner. By this point, both of Callie's arms were shaking uncontrollably, and her feet were jerking like they were being electrocuted. Despite that, Lucy wrapped her arms and legs around her so she could at least try to get some sleep. When Callie turned around to thank her, Lucy went ahead and kissed her. Callie's lips were cold and felt like rubber, but still she kissed them. If she didn't now, she didn't know when she would.

When she drew back, she couldn't see the other girl's expression in the dark. However, she heard a whispered, "Good night," and took that as a good sign.

"Night," she whispered back.

She fell asleep soon afterwards, exhausted. And as she did, she heard the voice from the scientist on the radio yesterday echoing through her head. *Mankind was never at the top of any food chain. And microbes are our natural predators. Bacteria and viruses kill us as they use us to reproduce. And science may have given us ways to fight back against some of the more common microbial predators, but there are always new ones just waiting to feast upon us. Mother Nature is a bitch that way, I guess.*

The first thing that hit Lucy when she awoke was the smell. An acrid, overpowering smell made up of shit, piss, sweat, and something else she couldn't identify. With a hacking cough, she opened her eyes. Sunlight was streaming in through a glass window stuck between the wall and ceiling, illuminating the basement. She saw four other campers lying on the floor, their faces and arms covered in scales.

They were dead. Their mouths hung open slackly, their eyes stared cloudily out at nothing, and their slow decay was the rotting smell Lucy had been unable to identify.

Her breathing quickened as she recognized Monica and Annie among the dead. Horror and disgust coursed through her, and a scream welled up in her lungs. A moan against her chest cut the scream off.

Callie was still asleep in her arms, but the scales had spread to her face, and her forehead was hot to the touch. She hadn't soiled herself yet, thank God, but that was little comfort to Lucy now. She knew what a fever meant with this disease.

"No," she whispered, her voice rough and scratchy. "No."

She hugged Callie tighter, afraid of what might happen if she let go. And then Lucy realized she felt fine.

Lucy froze, then laid Callie gently on the floor as she stood up. Her limbs weren't shaking, and she didn't feel feverish. She had a wet patch in her crotch, apparently from peeing herself in the night, but her shorts were drier now and she didn't feel like she had to go now. She hoped that was a good sign. There were plenty of scales on her body, but they weren't painful or falling off.

How was her speech? Lucy thought of some lines of Shakespeare she had memorized for class a while back and tried to say them aloud. However, while the words were there in her head, she found herself unable to speak more than half of them aloud. Her throat just refused to make the noises that formed words.

Was she not recovering after all? Or was it just very gradual? And if she was recovering, why? What made her special? And was anyone else recovering as well--?

And that was when she realized there were some of the people in the basement were missing. She and Callie were there. So were the bodies of Monica and Annie and two other campers she didn't know. But Colton, Ray and the two others were missing. Where did they go?

Something moved underneath the stairs.

Lucy cried out and, to her astonishment, jumped onto the wall. She then crawled, crablike, onto the ceiling, hanging there on all fours like a four-legged spider. Before she could marvel any further at what was happening, however, two figures slithered out from under the stairs.

Lucy stared in horror. She recognized Colton and Ray, but they had changed. They had become bulkier, animal-like, and misshapen. Colton's eyes had grown stalks like a snail's, and tusks were growing out from Ray's upper lip. They glanced up at her, unsurprised by where she was or by their own transformation.

And then she heard their voices in her head.

Lucy. It's okay. It's us.

She didn't respond. Her mind was reeling. Too many strange things were happening at once and she was terrified. As if sensing her fear, Ray and Colton's voices sounded together in her head, their voices calm and reassuring.

We were scared too, at first. We're changing in ways they don't cover in health class.

But then we realized. This was MVEC's doing. The virus wasn't killing us. It kills most people, but others...others are changed.

Think about it. The doctors called it mutative viral encephalopathic chorea. What does the mutative part mean? This is what it means. It's literally mutating us!

And that's why it's spreading so fast. It turned people into monsters and they went out to spread it further. The bear from two days ago was probably an infected, someone like us. That's how we all got infected.

And now it's mutating you. You're becoming something else. Something like us.

Lucy didn't want to respond. She didn't want to admit that any of this was happening, like something out of a bad sci-fi movie. And yet she was looking at her friends from the ceiling, long after gravity should have taken over, listening to their thoughts! Not only that, but were her fingers a bit longer than before? And was something on her back?

So, this was happening. She couldn't deny it. But that still left several questions, one of which she directed at Ray and Colton: *Why?*

We're not sure, Colton replied. It feels like...

...Like we'll figure it out soon enough, Ray finished. When we're further along with our transformations. But until then, it takes a lot of energy to transform. We need to eat whatever's available.

Ray reached under the stairs and pulled out what was left of a camper's leg. He then brought the meaty limb to his mouth and tore into it, his tusks gouging into it with wet scraping noises.

Lucy's stomach churned. But not out of horror. Her mind was reacting with horror, but her stomach—her entire body—was calling out for fresh meat.

Even so, she thought a single word: *No*.

Not sure you'll have a choice soon, Colton replied. *It didn't feel like we had one. And we still need to eat. We're still changing. And we'll take what we can get.*

Even if it's still technically alive, Ray added. Both boys locked eyes on Callie, who let out a troubled moan in her sleep.

Rage ignited in Lucy and she jumped down from the ceiling. *Don't you dare!*

The boys shrugged. *Okay, we'll leave her alone*, Ray replied. *But we still need to eat. And so do you.*

They each grabbed one of the remaining campers whose names Lucy didn't know and began to tear away. The smell of ripe blood and meat filled the room, making Lucy want to gag. She wanted to be filled with shock and abhorrence.

But instead, all she felt was hunger. Something deep within her, something primal that didn't recognize human concepts like good and evil, was whispering in her mind, urging her to eat Monica and Annie. She needed the strength to protect Callie. She couldn't do that if she was weak with hunger.

And Monica and Annie weren't doing anything now. They were just meat. They would be happy to know that they had a small hand in protecting their fellow camper.

Tears streaming down her face, Lucy drew Monica and Annie's corpses towards her and pulled Monica's arm towards her mouth. She expected the meat to taste disgusting. Instead, she found it delicious.

How long had passed? The sun was setting again, so it was probably late.

All day, Lucy, Ray and Colton had hidden in the basement, feeding on the dead as their bodies changed. Ray's legs had merged soon after he'd finished his second camper and become one long, snake-like tail. Meanwhile, Colton had become large and apelike, with crab-like claws on the ends of his arms.

They weren't done changing yet, but they were getting close. What they would be when they were done, Lucy wasn't sure. But she wasn't scared. A strange calm had settled over her, even as her body screamed in pain from her organs shifting, merging and dividing within her. Even as a second mouth was coming into existence where her belly button used to be and something she still couldn't identify was growing on her back.

In too much pain to move much, Lucy lay beside Callie, who had stopped moaning long ago. At first, Lucy had hoped that meant she was going to live and transform like the rest of them. But her temperature and her shallow breathing betrayed the truth. Callie would die soon. And when she did, what would Lucy do?

From above them came the creak of heavy footsteps on the old house's boards. Lucy, Ray and Colton looked upwards, the latter two making warning noises in their throats. They heard shouts of "Clear!" and then muffled speaking.

Probably the soldiers, Ray thought. They're still looking for us.

What do we do? Lucy asked.

Leave it to us, Colton replied. *We're further along. We'll protect you.*

You and not Callie. They knew she was dying too.

The basement door swung open and two sets of feet thumped down the stairs. At the same time, Colton thrust his claws under the bannister, slicing through the legs of a soldier. The soldier screamed as they fell to the bottom of the stairs, blood spurting out of their stumps. The second soldier shouted and jumped over Colton's claws, landing on the step above their comrade and pointing their gun into the basement.

Before the second soldier could fire off a shot, however, Ray rushed forward, grabbed the soldier, pulled them off the stairs, and thrust his tusks into their chest. The gun clattered loudly to the ground, now completely useless as its owner died.

From upstairs the soldiers' comrades, sensing something was wrong but not sure what, sent a hail of bullets down the stairs. The now-footless soldier jittered like a fish on land, blood now gushing from their back as well as their feet.

Then the firing stopped, and in the lull, Ray whipped up the stairs and onto the main floor. There were screams, several loud bangs, a ferocious roar and then blood began to seep through the gaps in the ceiling boards. All was silent upstairs.

Colton lumbered over the footless soldier and climbed the stairs. He did not return. Left alone, Lucy started to cry. Not because she was horrified by what she'd just witnessed, but

because she wasn't concerned at all. She had changed in more ways than one, and she wasn't sure she liked any of them.

“Lucy.”

Callie's eyes were open. Lucy gathered the sick girl into her arms. She wanted to ask her how she was feeling, but her voice box couldn't form the words. And besides, she already knew the answer.

Callie reached her hand up to Lucy's cheek. “You got prettier. Jealous.” A silence fell over them. It seemed just the very act of speaking had exhausted her. Then she said, “Hey. Kiss me one last time. And then...then eat me. If I'm going to die...”

But Callie didn't finish the sentence. Whether she was too weak, the aphasia too advanced, or she just couldn't voice the thought, Lucy didn't know and didn't care. All that mattered was that her friend knew what was happening to her and to Lucy and she had decided how she wanted to go. And Lucy wouldn't refuse her.

Tears streaming down her face, she pressed her lips to Callie's. Then, as Callie's hand fell away from her cheek and her breathing slowed to a stop, Lucy took off her shirt and fed her friend to the mouth that had formed on her belly, its sharp teeth gnashing in excitement for its first meal.

Sometime later, Lucy left the house and crawled up the trunk of the tallest tree she could find. There, she watched as distant fires lit up the night. Camp Wymott and the nearby town were ablaze. The army's efforts to suppress the spread of MVEC had failed spectacularly, it seemed.

Well, that was to be expected. Lucy knew that now. She knew what MVEC was now, what it truly was.

After she had finished consuming Callie, she had gone through more changes. After that, she had discovered she could produce a sticky thread and make clothes for herself to replace the ones she had soiled earlier. And as she made herself a crude dress, it came to her. The knowledge that MVEC was Earth's revenge.

Mother Earth isn't just a hunk of rock falling through space, Lucy thought, watching the flames burn. She's alive and she's a beast nobody should ever mess with. And she's mad that humans messed with her. So, she decided to strike back. She unleashed a new predator for mankind.

But the new predator, MVEC, wouldn't just kill off the humans. The Great Beast, Mother Earth, knew humanity would do all they could to fight back. So, she came up with a solution.

In the Silmarillion, the goddess Yavanna begged a higher god for the creation of the Ents when she learned that the dwarves and later man would cut down her children, the trees, Lucy thought. Well, Mother created her own Ents, though we're much more terrifying than anything Tolkein ever dreamed of. And we will ensure humanity doesn't forget whom they need for life.

She could see it all. When more of her kind were born and humanity's numbers had been reduced, they would organize. Lucy would be at the head of that organization. Her mutation made her a different sort of Ent, one that would take charge of others and direct their sacred task. And then, when the world was reshaped, their Mother would be satisfied.

And that would be fine. Humanity would survive, now more cognizant of their place. Callie would be a part of Lucy for the rest of her life, however long that was. And those she cared about would either die, mutate, or be spared to keep humanity alive.

Now an Ent, Lucy could accept that.

But for now, she must find her brethren. She could sense Ray nearby, wounded but alive; Colton in town, saving those going through their mutations from being shot; and the one who had brought MVEC to the camp, hidden in a cave. She had to meet up with them, so that they would be ready when the time came.

The massive butterfly wings that had been growing on her back, multicolored and glowing in the dark, unfurled and spread wide. They flapped once, twice, three times. Lucy rose into the air and flew in Ray's direction.

The great work had begun.