

Coccus Pocus 2019: scary story cover sheet

Student's name or nickname (optional): 

Student's age: 19

Story title: Resistance Remains

A 50-word summary of your story:

Leading anthropologist and archaeobiology enthusiast, Haley Jackson, investigates a newly discovered archaeological site located in northern Peru. After examining the remains of a young girl, members of the crew start to come down with a mysterious flu-like disease. Haley attempts to find a treatment before they get worse.

Word count: 1971

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Resistance remains by Paisleigh Smythe (1st prize)

Haley Jackson hadn't expected it to be this wet and humid when she'd signed up to go on the expedition. A small archaeological site situated in only god knows where, located high up in Peru. Its discovery had been well received from much of the world and it wasn't a surprise that they had sent her to finish up the job, she thought smugly. A firm bachelors of anthropology, top of her class, and a masters in archaeobiology. She felt prepared for anything. She'd only picked the best team to accompany her. Her best friend, Diana, accomplished chef, Antonio, crew doctor, Lin, and several other accomplished anthropologists like herself. It had taken a few hours of driving from the nearest town to reach their destination. Haley had complained the whole way; she wasn't much of a complainer, but she despised the heat. The only thing she hated more than the heat was dealing with people.

The guide, who had met them at the foot of the site, was tall and shrouded in thick, layered clothing. Mismatched socks, an unbuckled belt and a hastily sewn shawl, made of multiple fabrics. Diana had whispered to Haley how odd the choice of clothing was in this heat, but Haley brushed her off. The guide was needed as they went further into the rainforest. Others in the crew had already twisted legs and brushed sharp spiny plants along the walk through the low-land. They had been guided to a set of five tents, located a few steps away from the site. They were closed in by cliffs and thick foliage on all sides and Haley couldn't help but feel further from home than ever.

"Odd," Haley heard Lin exclaim, before she could stop herself.

"Hmm?" Haley responded, eager to start the excavation.

"I was sure we were supposed to meet another team here..." Lin had trailed off.

"I'm sure they're just behind. The terrain isn't exactly friendly," Haley had responded coolly, fanning her face from the heat.

It had been several hours later, while the sun had begun to set, that the first bones were discovered, wrapped tightly in a multi-fabric shroud. Haley couldn't help but notice that the shroud looked similar to that of the shawl the guide had worn. The crew swarmed the remains and begin to poke and prod. Diana quickly retorted, "It appears to be a female. I'd say pre-adolescent. The ilium hasn't begun fusing yet." "Wow, so young," exclaimed one of the younger and inexperienced cultural anthropologists.

"I wonder what caused all these marks on the bone. This one here appears to be from some sort of trauma, maybe some sort of abuse. But this one, it puzzles me. Almost looks like the bone has been eaten away by something," replied another senior anthropologist, sliding their rubber-gloved hand along the fragile, brittle bones.

After the discovery, the team had returned to the camp for dinner, a wash in the local lake then hopefully get some sleep before the dig the next day. The transmitter was broken before their arrival and Antonio, a fantastic chef and a man of all trades, had

begun work on fixing it. His rapid fire of curses were fitting as the camp was alive with cheers and the sound of happy drinking. Haley had felt uneasy being unable to contact the outside world. Her separated and soon to be ex-husband, Ian, and their young daughter, Emma, back home could be in danger and she'd have no idea. Their photos were safely tucked away in her wallet. Large bright smiles, one of the only times they'd been together. Haley knew she'd have to let Ian go at some point. She'd already planned to arrange a meeting with him to discuss custody of Emma, who resembled Ian more than she did her, when she got back.

Haley instead had been focused on determining the cause of death for the young girl. It was indicative that the girl had some hardships. Malnutrition and multiple abrasions down to the bone along her arms and legs; the idea that the young girl had undergone some physical abuse was not far-fetched. What Haley could not decipher were the marks on the bones that indicated the flesh having been eaten away. After a few minutes of observing, Diana proposed,

"Could the marks potentially be bacterial in nature? There seems to be some blood staining, inferring it occurred perimortem."

"Interesting. Diana, can you bring me my microscope please? And a lamp."

"I've got you, Boss," Diana replied with a wink.

"And can you swab some of the remnants of this soft tissue. The body was preserved quite well with the shroud. Oh, and get some soil samples from the grave."

It was already early afternoon by the time Haley and Diana had collected the samples and slept. Haley had to call to bed early after slicing her finger on a rock by the lakeside. The other members of the crew had been up at dawn excavating the site in the boiling sun, amid all the overgrown ferns and crumbling soil. They were used to Haley's bossy attitude and knew better than to test her wits by starting later. Diana had reported to Haley's tent, perplexed, at a little past one o'clock.

"I don't recognise this bacteria."

"What do you mean you don't recognise this bacteria?"

"This bacteria is in the water, soil samples and on the remains. I can't identify it. I suspect it's a member of the pseudomonas genus. It's gram-negative, rod-shaped and glows a yellow-green when I shine UV light over it. But it's not any of the common ones I've looked at! It forms these biofilms in my sample dish. Quite a lot of them."

"Diana! Haley!" Boomed a loud voice from outside the small tent, resonating from the small treatment tent nearby. Inside the tent lay one of the crew, feverish and vomiting meekly into a bucket at the side of the rickety bed.

"What's wrong with Geoff, Lin?" Murred Haley as she looked in with horror.

Haley wasn't good with dealing with people when they're alive, especially when they're sick.

“A fever. I think it might be the flu, but I’m not too sure yet. I’ve put him on some broad-spectrum antibiotics. I tried to ask the guide for any local remedies that might help the ailment, but I couldn’t find him... He’s not anywhere.”

“What do you mean the guide is gone?” Haley whispered, feeling a little uneasy.

“Aren’t the other team supposed to be here by now too?”

“I tried to tell you before, Haley,” said Lin with worry, “I think they were here before us. I found some food in the pantry that couldn’t be older than a few days! And our clinical waste bin was labelled only a few days ago.”

It would be impossible to travel back to the truck without the use of a guide. Haley couldn’t help but be filled with dread.

Over the course of a few hours, more of the crew began to complain of fever and malaise. Haley felt sick to her stomach when she heard the news that Diana had also fallen sick with the mysterious flu-like symptoms. The broad-spectrum antibiotics that had been brought along on the trip had been futile and the demand was much higher than the supply. It wasn’t hard to see the stress on Lin’s face and the tenseness of her muscles. Nor was it difficult to hear the muffled screams during the early hours of the morning. Haley had barreled into the tent at the mere sound of a yell. She hadn’t expected to walk into the sight she was faced with. Geoff was paler, if that were possible. Along his right arm lay a large purple and black mark, following the cut from a hooked spiny plant he had sustained on the walk to the camp two days before. His whimpers, groans and curses showed that the high level of morphine he was administered was doing little to counter the immense pain. Blood was trickling from his mouth between his clenched teeth. Lin finally persuaded Geoff to open his mouth and they were met with a slimy layer coating the inside of the gums and plaques forming on his teeth, causing them to bleed vigorously. Haley couldn’t help but take in a breath. The blood wouldn’t stop pouring and the zombie-like appearance wasn’t helping the anthropologist feel any less queasy. Only moments later did his eyes glaze over and his mouth open and close of its own accord. Words rambled out, like spells. Jumbled and disorderly. It wasn’t hard to see that the pain and dehydration had caused him to go mad. There wasn’t enough saline and water for everyone. Haley shuddered. She didn’t want to have to get to a point where she had to choose who got what.

Haley was on a mission and she was desperate. Every antibiotic in the camp was situated on Haley’s desk, where she sat culturing the bacteria that had oozed from Geoff’s arm. It was the mysterious pseudomonas that Dianna had found. It had to be. Haley wore gloves as she handled the sample, but they felt futile. It felt like it was in the air, suffocating her as she breathed. Tapping on her back and whispering in her ear that it was hopeless. After her disc diffusion test came back, she indeed felt hopeless. There were no lawns; no zones of inhibition. It had to be a mistake. This area was unoccupied for years, Haley remembered. Was it possible for this area to

have been used for the testing of bio-weapons? She shook her head. That was a silly thought, she reasoned to herself. But, a super bacteria resistant to most antibiotics and one that has a strong tendency to form biofilms didn't seem very possible. She could only stop and think about what could be the next step of the disease. And then it hit her. Pseudomonas. It could be respiratory. She knew it was too late, but she slapped on her face-mask. When she stepped outside the tent to inform the others, she couldn't help but feel faint from the heat of the sun. Her stomach twisted and she only just stopped herself from vomiting. She hadn't eaten today. She was too worried and nothing would stay down.

She had known it would happen. A loud pop had emanated from the medical tent. She knew, but she couldn't stop herself from peeking. She was horrified. The crew's skin had melded and adhered to the surface of the stretchers and the few beds. Their bodies were swollen, bleeding and sore. Blackened limbs and bleeding blisters, with their flesh being eaten from the bone. It was obvious they would die from sepsis, contaminated by numerous bacteria. But that wasn't what caught Haley's attention and stopped her from uttering anything but a small yelp. On the floor in front of her, lay Geoff's head. His face expressionless, almost peaceful. His limbs lay scattered across the floor, laying in beds alongside patients and stuck to the roof of the tent. The air was thick with aerosolized blood and gore. He had exploded. Dispersion. He was just a human biofilm.

Haley fell to the ground. Silence. It felt like hours, but minutes later, a triumph yell came from the area of the transmitter. The oblivious Antonio switched on the broadcaster and an automated message sounded out across the entire camp:

“Major cities across the continent have been quarantined due to a bacterial outbreak. Stay inside, keep your doors locked and drink bottled water. I repeat: Major cities...”

It felt like the apocalypse; the same message kept repeating. Haley didn't even notice the purple and black bruise forming on her finger. She just felt dread.