

"My name is Dr Dakota Aryella."

The man sitting in front of me stares blankly at me. My legs begin to shake under the table.

"I have a doctorate in microbiology. I would like this job as I would excel in my research here and bring the company to a new level-"

"You're hired."

"What?" I can't believe my luck. Hardly through the speech, and I'm already on the job?

The man starts, "Most people who get as far as the entry speech are unnerved by me and either lose their confidence or leave – or both. You seem pretty calm still. A good employee doesn't panic."

I grin uncontrollably. "Thank you sir! I won't let you down."

He extends his hand to me; I shake it, unable to hide my joy. "Beck Teria. It is a pleasure to have you on my team." I turn to go, but Beck stops me. "Your name. It's funny. The first name ends in '-ota', like many bacteria phylums do. And your last name ends in '-ella', like a lot of bacteria do."

"All the better suited for the job!" I laugh. "Your name is funny as well. It sounds like bacteria." Before I see his reaction, I leave, too excited to start.

Two weeks later I settle in comfortably to my role in the lab. Everyone has their own lab- isn't that amazing! I've been researching a golden bacteria. It's formed a little layer of gelatinous slime on the Petri dish and keeps growing in height. Biofilms were always one of the things that had fascinated me during my doctorate. Unfortunately, today my mind is hazy and clouded with fog. For the past few days I had stayed up for most of the night to write down some of my lab results. *I'm hungry*, I think to myself. As soon as I say this, I notice a sandwich left beside the microscope and Petri dish. Weirdly, I don't remember leaving it there. *I suppose a bite can't hurt... Right?*

I decide it's finally time to get a full night's rest. I lay down on my pillow, and before I know it, darkness overtakes.

I am standing in my lab again. Everything looks the same as when I left yesterday. The microscope there, and the open Petri dish...

Wait. Open?

A voice echoes around the room. "Dakota, you broke one of the lab rules! No eating in the lab!" It laughs, sounding quite like an evil version of me. I look around, trying to find the source of the voice, but there is no-one around. "You're going to get fired!" It taunts in a singsong voice.

"Who are you? Go away!" I yell.

"You need to quarantine yourself!" The voice returns, but softer. "It is already taking over- hurry-"

"What is?" What is it?" I ask, confused.

A horribly distorted voice cuts through the scene. "Dakota Aryella!"

I wake with a start, staring up at the ceiling. *Just a dream...* I think hesitantly. *Time to get back to work, then.*

As soon as I enter my lab, I close the Petri dish and attack the surrounding area with Dettol. "This slimy blob could be dangerous!" I say to myself. "Who knows how much it could have multiplied?" I grab the dish and observe it under the microscope warily. Suddenly, the bacteria begin to form words! I almost fall back in shock.

"I'm in your mind." It spells out, painstakingly slowly. I tilt my head and stare at it more.

"Or would this way of conversing be better?" A voice resounds in my mind and I yelp. It's the same voice from the dream!

"Who are you and what do you want from me?!"

The voice laughs, and the bacteria jiggle along with it. "I am the bacteria in that dish. Last night I contaminated the sandwich you ate! A part of me now resides in you, multiplying as we speak. Now, as my host, you will help me infect the whole world! Muahahahaha! And you can't do anything to stop me." It sneers. "For my first evil act, I'm stealing your name. My species name is something Aryella! Hahahaha I'll work on the genus later, I can't think of anything at the moment HAHAHA!" And as abruptly as the voice came, it leaves.

Heart pounding, I rush to the boss's office, but he's already at the break room, talking to some other man. "Sir, I believe we are all on danger! You have to believe me, there is a dangerous bacteria on the loose, you have to quarantine me-" Everyone in the vicinity turns to me in shock as the two men exchange glances.

"Doctor, where did your calm go? Do you want yourself to be fired?"

I snap my jaw shut hurriedly. *I can't lose my job!*

"That's what I thought. Now, I'm assigning you a lab partner. This is Anti Mike Robial."

"Call me Anti." He smiles, offering a hand to shake. I reluctantly take it.

"Dakota Aryella." I force myself to say.

"Good. Now get back to work." Mr Teria states darkly.

Back in the lab, I glance over at Anti, who has an incredibly bubbly personality. The perfect contrast to my seriousness. I think about initiating conversation, when I crouch to the floor, clutching my head. A

violent headache overtakes. "I'm back! Watch as I infect my first victim!" In a matter of seconds, I cannot control my body anymore! A thin layer of golden sludge encases me. The thick, slippery substance began to feel suffocating.

"Not so fast!" Someone exclaims. It's Anti, wielding a bottle of Dettol like a gun.

"Would you really do that? Would you *really* harm your fellow co-worker?!" I realise that since the bacteria are basically part of me, the Dettol could probably kill me as well!

I decide to take matters into my own hands. "Aryella bacteria, I challenge you to a duel!" I think as loudly as I can, assuming that we probably had some kind of shared consciousness or something.

"Ooh, how interesting!"

"But you must fully remove yourself from me first."

"Dakota, are you really sure-" starts Anti, but the sound of an exploding Petri dish cuts him off. The golden biofilm multiplies rapidly as it leaves the glass and me, forming a large amorphous blob that stands only a little taller than Anti. A part of its hand coagulates to form a solid gun-shaped structure.

"Let's go."

Adrenaline starts building in me as I face the sticky bacteria. Anti throws the spray bottle at me and I catch it expertly.

"Take 10 steps past each other, then shoot." I hadn't known that Anti had a serious side, but I really don't care. I keep my finger on the trigger. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, TEN! FIRE!"

I immediately whip round and send Dettol flying at the bacteria, watching it dissolve the bullet-shaped splotch of slime it had sent in my direction. It screams as if it had been shot- which, technically, it has. I mercilessly squeeze the trigger again, but the sleep deprivation of the past week catches up to me.

I am surrounded again, this time by darkness.

"Dakota, are you there?"

A quiet voice rings urgently through the darkness.

"What happened?" I ask, blearily sitting up. I'm... still on the lab floor? I have lost all sense of time perception.

"Thought we'd lost you there!" comments Mr Teria. "You've been asleep since yesterday!"

"It doesn't take a doctor to know that you were breathing and therefore were still alive." mutters Anti.

Beck glares at him, then turns back to me. "So what happened?" I ask, confused.

“Anti took the spray bottle and finished off the job.”

“They don’t call me anti-microbial for nothing!” I pause for a second, staring, and begin to clap slowly.

“Wow, I can’t believe you didn’t realise.” he grumbled.

I feel bad for not registering this pun (one of the best things while getting my degree was annoying the teachers with puns), but I suddenly realise something else.

“DETTOL ONLY KILLS 99.9% OF BACTERIA!!!”

“Calm down! That isn’t Dettol!” explains Beck. “That is one of my lab engineered formulas. Check the label.” I scrutinise it. ‘Kills 100% of bad or evil bacteria.’ It states confidently.

Mr. ‘Anti-microbial’ speaks up. “We have this ready at all times because oddly enough, this happens often. This is the third evil bacteria I’ve helped fight.” I tilt my head at him in surprise.

“This case was different though.” Beck continues. I’m almost to scared to ask why, but he answers anyways. “Basically your parents made a deal with that devil of a microorganism.”

“WHAT?!”