

Act V Scene 4

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.”

The little girl did not look fine. She did not look right at all. She was pale, stricken with grief, and moribund. It was becoming increasingly clear that she had contracted her father’s fatal affliction.

The quarantine team had arrived not too long ago. Their response was swift and effective, cordoning the township right off with countless rolls of yellow tape and isolating it from the rest of the world. Their actions alone could well have prevented this outbreak from become a full-blown pandemic.

The town itself was also divided into several quarantine zones. Medics, in their bright green hazmat suits, wandered from zone to zone, checking vital signs and ensuring that the ill were not left unattended to.

But while their damage control strategy had been effective at impeding the advancement of the front line, there was precious little that the medics could do for those that were gravely ill.

Lara looked at the feverish girl. We need a cure, she thought.

The laboratory was abuzz with activity. Researchers dashed around haphazardly, and there was an air of nervous excitement behind the hushed tones with which they spoke. The race for a cure had only just begun, but they had already made significant headway on that front, and there was a sense of cautious optimism among the research team.

Attila glanced at the central whiteboard, which dictated every step that they would take in the development of this cure, and he noted that samples of the virus were needed. Taking matters into his own hands, he left the scientists to squabble over the minutiae, and headed for the dispatch room.

The phone rang.

Lara, realising that she was the only decontaminated medic within the vicinity of the phone, moved to answer it.

“Hello?” she asked tentatively.

“Hi, this is Attila from Dispatch. Just calling in to ask for a number of blood samp—”

“Wait a minute. Attila?”



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Attila frowned. Nobody from the quarantine team should know his name, he thought.

“L...Lara?”

Lara laughed, in spite of the grim circumstances. It had been a long time since she had heard Attila’s voice, and it left her feeling reassured, in a way, knowing that her friend was providing her with his support from half a world away, and had not been left stranded by the fickle whims of the Cube.

“So what did you need?”

“Well, I was just calling in to ask if you could secure us some samples of blood from the patients?”

“Done.” replied Lara, with clinical efficiency. She jotted the request down in her mental notepad.

“Perfect. I think that’ll be all, then. Oh, and Lara?”

“Yes?”

“Do take care.”

Lara smiled as she set the phone down. Then, with no time to lose, she collected her things and went off to do Attila’s bidding.

Lara had been on the front lines for a while. She had identified suspected transmissions, and had corralled them into designated quarantine areas for monitoring. She had seen firsthand what the disease could do to the human body, and she knew full and well about the dangers of imprudence.

But she soon realised that it was not for her. To travel from house to house, swinging Death’s scythe at will and assigning patients to quarantine was not her cup of tea. Every wasteful second that they lingered on somebody’s front doorstep was another second of survivor’s guilt that accumulated within her. Every routine test that she performed could potentially deprive another of a fulsome life.

Lara was crestfallen.

But it was in times like these when she thought about her mission. These... scenarios, she thought. Were they even real? Or were they just some scripted fantasy contained within the Cube?

The only thing she knew for certain was that the oppression experienced at home — her own home — was real. A quotidian nightmare that haunted every moment of her life — one that would not change, would not grow, would not adapt — every day, the same tribulation, over and over and over and over again, like an extended cut of Groundhog Day.

No, no, Lara thought. It can’t keep going on like this.

Firming in her resolve, Lara glanced down at the empty vials that lay before her. She knew what she had to do.



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“Never in the twenty years that I’ve worked here have I ever seen this place as undermanned and under-resourced as it is now.”

“The government’s handling of this crisis has been a downright disgrace!”

“If we’re not getting paid to save the country, then who is?”

“Eureka!”

“I’ve heard rumours that they’re shutting everything. All of it! Gone! It just ain’t right!”

Attila jolted into action. His ears registered something different over the mundanity of the moaning and groaning, whinging and whining. Something at a different frequency. Something that heralded a miniscule ray of hope within him.

He looked to his right and saw a crowd of white coats beginning to congregate around a single scientist. Attila was well aware of the fact that he had absolutely no comprehension of the world that he had just entered, and not a clue about the identity that he had just defrauded, but, for fear of missing out, he waded his way through the crowd to hear what the researcher had to say.

“... so we’ve discovered that by targeting the viral RNA-dependent RNA polymerase with a broad-spectrum antiviral drug, we have the capacity to disrupt the genomic replication of...”

His fellow scientists murmured with approval.

Attila, after hearing half a sentence, was in the throes of boredom.

“So, it’s a cure, then?” interjected Attila, impatiently.

The scientist, unused to such direct lines of questioning, had a momentary lapse in concentration and lost his words.

He quickly regained composure, however, and responded:

“While we cannot definitively state that this is a ‘cure’ for the virus in question, we do have reasonable evidence to suggest that this therapeutic approach may have not insignificant efficacy and, as such, should be considered as a drug candi—”

“IT WAS A YES OR NO QUESTION!”

“Well, yes, I suppose.”

The scientist looked both startled and defeated at the same time.

In another life, Attila would have sympathised with the man and what he had just put him through. But it was not in this life. With a ruthless efficiency that would make even Jan proud, he ordered:

“Let’s send word out. Get these drugs shipped off. And hopefully scrub out this outbreak. Come on! Let’s go!”



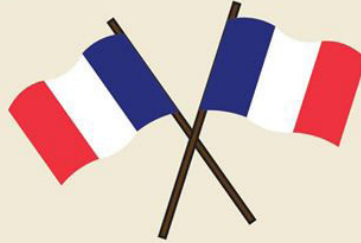
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The scientists responded promptly to the now-irresistible command present in Attila's voice, and dispersed meekly to carry out their duties.



CHOPPING BLOCK



Flavour rating: 10/10

The next recipe comes straight from Paris, the world's gastronomy capital. This new dish is set to completely upend traditional cooking, because it uses ingredients harvested from all seasons of the calendar. Time to give it a try!

Ingredients

- A vat with capacity 44L, such as those used to contain harvested grapes
- 119 fruits from the service tree, which are sometimes hard to spot in the fog
- 213 slices of turnip, de-frosted
- A 186 g piece of marl rock, often found under layers of snow
- 207 filbert leaves, speckled with rain droplets
- 56 tuna, cured by the wind
- 226 periwinkle flowers, recently germinated
- 182 g of nightingale meat, marinated in flowery tea
- 161 g of mugwort, dried by heat
- 38 stalks of winter barley, with a fruity aroma

Preparation

1. For the entrée: Bake the service tree fruits for 2min 78s. Sprinkle with mugwort and further bake for 3min 47s. Let sit in the vat for 69s.
2. For the soup: Boil the periwinkle flowers for 2min 78s. Add turnip and simmer for 1min 39s. Garnish the soup with filbert and let sit for 3min 47s. Take the winter barley and wash for 1min 39s. Crush it into flour with the marl (this should take 4min 86s) and use it to thicken the soup
3. For the main course: Fry the nightingale for 4min 86s. Add in the tuna and fry for another 4min 17s
4. Serve.