

"Matriphagy"

Screenplay by  
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FADE IN:

INT. PRISON PASSAGE - DAY

The journalist MARY REEFE, mid 30s, stands with four armed guards and the government agent DELARIS JACOBS. They stand before a locked door.

DELARIS

Any idea why she asked for you?

MARY

No. I've never met her. I don't know her, apart from what's in the media.

Delaris nods at a guard. The guard opens the door.

INT. PRISON ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mary enters the room. LISA HAF, late 60s, sits at a table. She is in prison clothes and chains. There is a camera in each corner where the walls meets the ceiling, and a large one-way mirror in one wall. Mary sits down opposite Lisa. The guard closes the door. We hear it LOCK. Mary and Lisa are the only two in the room. Lisa watches Mary like a hawk watches a mouse.

MARY

I'm Mary Reefe. You asked to see me.

Lisa studies her in silence for a moment.

LISA

Are you happy?

MARY

(caught off guard by  
the question)

I... I imagine it's difficult for anyone to be happy at a time like this. Am I here to interview you?

LISA

You probably have a list of questions. The most important being why I created a virus that wiped out half the human race. And is there a cure.

A flash of anger crosses Mary's face.

MARY

Is there?

LISA

It's on my computer. The fact you're asking tells me they haven't cracked my password yet.

Lisa smiles.

LISA

Insane isn't it? A simple, abstract thing like a password stands between the human race and extinction. Like a nuclear launch code. But it's not just the code, is it? It's also the state of mind of the people who control it.

Lisa turns serious.

LISA

I'll give you the password if you can convince me to.

Mary holds her breath and clenches her fists. Lisa looks down at Mary's hands.

LISA

The fate of the human race is in your hands.

MARY

(shakes head)

No. You can't expect that from me. Why me? I'm not important.

LISA

I've promoted you to someone important. You can accept it or walk out that door and never return. Whatever you decide, you'll wake up each morning to face it. It'll consume you. Like falling in love, or losing the one you love.

Mary unclenches her fists.

MARY

How can I convince you?

LISA

You can start by telling me if you're happy.

Mary looks away for a moment. She wonders if she should answer.

MARY

OK. I'm not happy.

LISA

Neither am I. A year after I became a doctor I realised I wasn't happy. I realised I did not care about people. It occurred to me that I was never close to anyone. Not my family, friends, nor lovers. I was emotionally disconnected. It bothered me and I spent an awful amount of time thinking about it.

She looks down at the table.

LISA

I wondered if there's something wrong with me.

She looks back at Mary.

LISA

I started to study people. To see if I can learn how to care. I desperately wanted to care. To be able to be close to someone. To anyone.

She leans forward.

LISA

Then one day something dawned on me. A belief I could not shake.

Lisa shows her chained wrists to Mary. The chains RATTLE, then fade to silence.

LISA

When people started slavery they didn't foresee the long-term effects. They unknowingly taught their children that human life has a monetary value.

She leans back.

LISA

Subsequent generations applied that belief to their own lives, to the lives of their parents, family and community. That belief influenced the formation of governments, institutions, corporations, banks. It influenced capitalism. Insurance. Debt. Poverty.

She takes a breath.

LISA

It led to a lack of empathy, to the creation of old age homes. It made the homeless invisible. It's become more natural to care about trivial things, like entertainment and possessions, than the safety of children. Than whether children are fed.

She puts her hands on the table.

LISA

The human race is ill. It's an illness we won't even acknowledge. An illness I also suffer from. I didn't cry for a single person I killed.

Mary looks uncertain. A fly lands on Lisa's hand. She gently brushes it off.

LISA

Did you cry for any of them?

MARY

Yes. A friend lost her daughter to the virus.

LISA

What about before the virus? Did you cry, or care about anyone who died in civil wars or poverty?

Mary is silent.

LISA

(softer)

It's not entirely your fault if you didn't. It's the age you were born into.

Lisa looks down, closes her eyes for a moment, then looks at Mary.

LISA

I knew your mother.

Mary is surprised.

MARY

What?

LISA

I met her at a hospital before you were born. Did she tell you about the complications she had with your pregnancy?

MARY

You're lying. She would've told me.

LISA

You had an abnormality as a foetus. You were absorbing too much of your mother's nutrients. She got emaciated and sick, and spent a lot of time in hospital.

Mary stares in incredulous silence.

LISA

The other doctors told her to get an abortion because neither of you would survive the birth. But I told her I could save you both. And I did.

MARY

You're lying.

LISA

You were in the womb for only six months, but when you came out you looked nine months old. You were a miracle.

Mary stops herself from scoffing at Lisa.

LISA

I took samples of you and your mother's DNA.

A cold chill runs through Mary.

LISA

You inherited a mutation from your mother. And she probably got it from one of her parents. Over the years I've seen hints of the same mutation in groups of people whose ancestors suffered genocide or slavery. An echo of the past. A deep scar.

Lisa gives a short dry laugh.

LISA

It's ironic. The virus was only possible because of people's lack of empathy and compassion.

Lisa studies Mary intensely.

LISA

I used your DNA to create the virus.

The room is silent for a moment. Mary's breathing increases. She gets up from the chair.

MARY

(light-headed)

No...

She holds on to the edge of the table, then walks to the door. She turns the handle, but it is locked. She raises her fist, about to bang on the door.

LISA

You still haven't convinced me. Convince me my beliefs are wrong.

Mary stands frozen for a moment. She lowers her arm to her side. She stares at the door with her back to Lisa.

MARY

Why did you do it?

LISA

To free us from slavery.

MARY

There'll be no one left to free if everyone's dead.

LISA

If we're unwilling to change then we don't deserve to survive. The only way to change us is to pull the comfort zone out from under us. And the virus is eroding our comfort zone.

Mary turns around in fury to face Lisa.

MARY

(furious)

You can't...

Mary stops. A struggle on her face. Slowly her anger fades.

Mary's POV: Lisa sits in the chair. For the first time we see her as a vulnerable, lonely old woman in chains.

Mary walks to Lisa, bends down and hugs her. Lisa is surprised. Mary holds her tight. She holds her in silence for a long time.

LISA

The password is your mother's name.

After a while Mary gets up and walks to the door. We hear it UNLOCK. She turns to look at Lisa, smiles softly, then leaves the room.

INT. PRISON PASSAGE - CONTINUOUS

The guard closes the door. Mary leans with her back against the wall. Delaris comes out of the room adjacent to Lisa's. He hands Mary a bottle of water.

DELARIS

The password worked. We'll find the cure if it's on her computer.

He smiles at her.

DELARIS

Thank you.

MARY

What'll happen to her?

DELARIS

I don't know. No single person has ever killed over four billion people before. But first we have to find the cure and make sure it works.

Mary looks at the door.

MARY

This feels staged. Me meeting her today.

DELARIS

What do you mean?

MARY

She didn't need me. She could've just given you the password.

DELARIS

I think she needed you more than you realise.

One of the guards turns to Delaris.

GUARD

We're ready to move her.

Delaris nods. He and Mary move further away from the door. The guard opens the door and two of them go in and return with Lisa. Lisa looks at Mary. The four guards escort Lisa down the passage.

INT. PRISON CELL - LATER

Lisa walks into the cell. She is no longer in chains. The door closes behind her. We hear it LOCK. She sits on the edge of the bed. She runs her hand through her grey hair. She gets up, stands for a moment and looks around the room. Tears start to well up in her eyes. She sits on the bed and rubs her hand across her mouth and chin. She starts crying. Soon she struggles to breathe from the SOBBING. She lies down, curls up on her side and cries uncontrollably. Her SOBBING echoes around the room.

INT. PRISON CELL - LATER THAT NIGHT

Lisa is asleep. A fly crawls in underneath the door. It flies to the opposite wall and sits there. Lisa sits up and looks at the fly. The fly begins to grow. While growing it makes the sound of DRY WOOD CONTINUOUSLY BREAKING. Soon it is over two metres long. It THROWS UP on the wall. Its vomit starts to erode the wall. Lisa smiles calmly.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - DAY - A FEW DAYS LATER

We hear RAIN. Mary walks barefoot to the built-in wardrobe. She opens the wardrobe's door. She reaches in to take out a jacket. She pauses then sits down in the wardrobe, on the floor, with her back against the wall. Her legs stick out through the door. She sits in silence for a while. There's a KNOCK on the hotel door.

DELARIS (O.S.)

Mary? It's Delaris.

MARY

It's open.

He walks in and sees her sitting in the wardrobe. He sits on his haunches near her.

DELARIS

You OK?

MARY

(nods)

Any sign of Lisa?

DELARIS

No. And we're still trying to figure out what she used to erode those walls. The whole world is looking for her. It's only a matter of time...

They sit in silence for a moment.

DELARIS

We found the cure.

MARY

(relieved)

Thank God.

She smiles at him. Then realises Delaris doesn't seem very happy about the news.

MARY

What's wrong?

DELARIS

There's a catch.

She frowns.

DELARIS

The cure only works when the brain produces Epatirolin. And the brain only produces Epatirolin when you experience empathy.

FADE OUT:

THE END