

"Sinew"

By Henry Houska

No one knew what the mound of flesh really was. Was it a monstrous whale? Something sent from the heavens? From Hell? Either way, the Western coast of the UK was invaded by a mountain of flesh, bone, sinew, and blood, all of which washed on shore one night. This whole appearance was illogical because Ireland should've protected this part of the coast and to add to that, the tumor should've been detected somehow, whether seen floating towards the shore or by passing ships while the mass was at sea... but it wasn't, it wasn't detected at all, it just appeared, a fleshy mile-huge mass... just appeared.

Obviously, the world had to know more. What was the mass? Could we do research to figure out the type of tissue that it came from? Could we glean how this whole bundle of flesh was sticking together even with the apparent lack of sinew in the proper places or proportion? Religious groups and cults even started to group around the mass, claiming that the massive chunk of brawn was flesh from God himself. Eventually, the UK government stepped in to sort out the chaos through the Flesh and Sinew Harvesting Accords, which stipulated that each group could send in one team alternating between groups each week. The Accords also funded the creation of base camps in the Flesh, which turned out to be easy enough to create with standard fortifications, as is standard in mines.

I come into this story working as an "external research and processing specialist" for one of the government's teams, as pompous as the name sounds, the work isn't that colorful or prestigious. We're provided with rough-looking flensing knives, hack-saws, butcher knives, and, if we're lucky, powered saws, all of which we use to rend and pare chunks off the blob. So far, I've only had to work on the outside of the blob, an arrangement I was more than comfortable

with, but last week I got a promotion to "internal research and processing specialist." Sure, the pay was better, but I've heard too many horror stories to ever want to go inside the mass, and yet, I couldn't deny the promotion, I needed the work and asking to not be promoted would be paramount to quitting so in the end I had to deal with it.

Today was the first day that I was scheduled to enter the Flesh to start harvesting it from the inside. The first few steps that I take inside were nothing too out of the ordinary, the floor was just squishy and the smell turned sour, but because of the mostly natural light to my back, I was fine, yet as I take more and more steps inside and the natural light soon turned artificial, I feel a sense of dread build up inside me. Following along this path, colloquially known as a "vein," leading to the first encampment, actually inside the Flesh, I feel like I can sense my own veins crawling. Like I was an intruder in my own body, like I was one in this "body," if one could even call it that. I could feel my own skin prick up and expand as my own veins and arteries worked; being inside this mass of flesh and viscous gore made my thoughts turn towards the esoteric. Was I trodding in the body of a being so far beyond my comprehension like the bacteria in my blood? Was I slowly walking with gloppy, blood-clogged steps towards a horror that I wouldn't understand? Was I just a small, insignificant ant using crude instruments to defile a corpse of something great?

These thoughts hemorrhaged my consciousness in a river of blood-filled delirium, but eventually this stupor was broken when I arrived at the camp. I quickly met up with my supervisor and asked for my assignment for the day, eager to get done with whatever work was required and to leave this bloody, mysteriously hallow ground. I was informed that I would have one of the worst jobs that a flesh extrator could get; I was to work in an area of the Flesh in which rot and decay had consumed the meat, causing the area to be filled with unbreathable,

choking air. The supervisor didn't leave me any time to share my discontent, he just pointed me off towards the quartermaster to be equipped for my task ahead of me.

I was equipped in what felt like a diving suit, a rudimentary oxygen system with a rag jammed in it laced with peppermint oil, a clock with a timer telling me how much oxygen I had left, and a sack for me to put the chunks rendered off in. I was quickly pointed off in the direction I needed to walk and was sent on my way. From the very first steps I took off towards the decay, I knew my thoughts wouldn't fare any better than what they had been on my way here. The artificial light seemed just as sickly as when I had first entered, and now all my mind could attribute to it was the rot that I was heading towards. At first, the signs were small, a few blemishes appeared on the walls, the flesh surrounding me grew a duller, brackish tone, and the meat surrounding me looked less put together, but eventually the greys turned into blacks, the blemishes turned into holes burned out by rot, and the weak meat turned from a loose structure to a gelatin, sloughing off the walls and ceiling that surrounded me. Eventually, I reached the end of the tunnel that was carved out artificially, even though the path went on through crevices and cracks caused by decay.

The smell at this place was enough to make my eyes water, even through the diving suit and the peppermint oil. I assumed that this was a good enough place as any to start extracting meat from my surroundings. I pulled out my knife and started extracting generous chunks from the wall, this flesh cut off easier than the flesh on the outside that I was used to working with; I assume the rot weakened this batch. Another interesting thought crossed my mind as I worked, and it was about the bag. Normally, they would give us a bag with either multiple pouches or a box with a few subdivisions in it, because they wanted us to sort the different types of tissue that we had sawed off, but in this place they just gave a single sack because really none of the

different kinds of tissue could be distinguished apart; this fact brought me a little amusement.

After some time, I looked down and noticed my oxygen clock stated that I only had 10 minutes left, so excited to finally leave this place, I picked up my tools and my now-filled and oozing sack and headed back.

Honestly, my thoughts weren't as negative as I was heading back. I think the sweet smell of the peppermint was able to distract me from the decay that surrounded me, but just as I was getting lost in my first positive thoughts of the day, I heard a squelch come from up above me and as I looked up, I saw the flesh of the ceiling parting as a slob of melted ooze first started to trickly then flood through the ceiling; before I knew it, my whole path forward was blocked by a mixture of disintegrated flesh, rotted sinew, and the melted paste of what I assumed would have been bone. The deep and primordial feeling of fear sprang up through my throat and through the tiny, sweet distraction of peppermint. Then the lights went out as the wire that powered the artificial lights finally severed under the weight of the remaining material that was caving in. The last image that was burned into my eyes was the sight of even more flesh pouring in to block my way.

I didn't start panicking right away, I think I was just too stunned to actually worry, so I slowly got out my oxygen clock and rested my thumb on the hands as they ticked down to try to gauge the time that I had left: 7 minutes. As my conscience sank its teeth into this idea and slowly digested it, the panic set in; before I knew it, my arm was a whirling blade; I wielded my flensing knife with no accuracy or precision but with the brutality of a wolf sawing off its own leg to escape a trap. I cut and slashed and rent and sliced off flesh as fast as I could. My mind was barely comprehending if I even started in the right direction. I became a whirling dervish that only served to rend. Eventually, the cutting got harder, the flesh grew stronger and less

decayed, and the rot that once was a sign of death to me was dearly missed. My blade was only as fast as my body could handle it, and bit by bit, I was slowing down, and eventually, in my delirium, I struck bone carelessly. Bone pockets are rare in the Flesh, and overall they're not a huge worry, but they still needed to be worked around because striking a chunk of bone would dull any blade; I wasn't that lucky. With a silent cry, my blade shattered as I struck bone. I held the bladeless handle in my hand and wept; the silent cry had become audible. With shaky hands, I reached down and fumbled around with my clock to see how much time I had left before I choked: 2 minutes. Turns out I didn't even need that time to choke, as I started choking back the sobs and sniffles that invariably follow bad news. I sat in my grief for what must've felt like an eternity, my thumb resting on the hands of the clock as they ticked closer and closer to what I assumed was the time of my death. Again, it turned out I didn't even need that time to start choking.

In a moment that came too soon, I found that I couldn't take in a fresh breath... but my finger was still following the hands of the clock as they ticked down. My clock was broken, and it had robbed me of a minute of my life. In an instant, I slammed the clock into the chunk of bone that had broken my knife, and so too, broke this clock. In a feral fury, I launched forward and started ripping the flesh in front of me apart with my own hands. I felt the tendons and sinew between my fingers, and I ripped, and I teared, and I broke the links of flesh that bound me. I became my own god of Sinew and Flesh, and in that moment, I knew that I was the god that was in this body. I wasn't something small and insignificant, I was a god of Gore and Blood and Veins. As I choked and coughed and died, my hands ripped through a layer of flesh and peeled it apart, revealing the dazzling rays of the sun. Oxygen flooded my lungs, and I collapsed in relief, but my ears perked up at the sound of screams. I saw that people were screaming and pointing at

me, and in that moment, I realized that I had emerged changed. This trauma had changed me. I was the god of Skin and Sinew, and I was not one of them anymore. Covered, splattered, and drenched in viscous blood, with chunks of flesh hanging in the webbing of my fingers, I stood victorious, I stood transformed, and I stood in my final apotheosis. I stood as the master of Sinew. I stood as the master of Flesh. I stood as the master of Bone, and none could stand above me again.