

Prologue



The general glanced at the clock on the wall. He smiled. The hands stood at noon, the same hour he had eaten lunch nearly every day for twenty years. The general pushed out his chair and reached under his desk. His fingers wrapped around the handle of the cooler, his belly grumbling in anticipation. Tina had made meatloaf last night, and the only thing he liked better than Tina's warm meatloaf for dinner was Tina's cold meatloaf for lunch. In the same moment that the cooler thumped on the desk, his phone chirped and began flashing red light. The general pressed the flashing button.

"It's noon," he said calmly.

"I know, General, I'm sorry," the rushed clipped male voice came back to him through the device. "It's Doctor Ryan. He says he needs to talk to you. He says it's urgent."

"Well, go down there," the general responded, still calm. "See what it is that's so urgent, then come interrupt my lunch if you think I will agree."

"Sir." The secretary hesitated. "He has put the lab on lockdown. He won't let anyone in or out, and he says he will only talk to you."

The general sat up straighter. "Doctor Ryan? Are you sure?"

"Sir." The general's secretary was a very serious young man. Of course he was sure. Heaving a sigh, the general stowed the cooler under his desk for later. He checked his

sidearm, more out of habit than anything. Then he stood and made his way to the door.

His secretary stood to attention behind his own small square of desk.

“At ease,” the general nodded.

The secretary’s stance barely relaxed at the words.

“Shall I come with, sir?”

The general waved his hand. “All the way down there? No need. I’ll call if I need any notes taken or calls made.”

He didn’t mean to be insulting; the general simply wanted to be alone with his thoughts. His brisk hurried pace brought him quickly to a bank of elevators. Passing his hand over the lighted screen next to the small set of doors in the middle, the general stepped inside as the steel panels whooshed open. A pleasant nondescript female voice spoke as the doors shut.

“General Roberts, access level five,” the disembodied voice announced. “Which floor, sir?”

“The lab,” he snapped. “Floor F.”

“Floor F,” she repeated. “Research. Going down.”

The elevator stopped descending three floors down, and the general frowned when the doors opened.

“Sir!” The young man stood on the other side of the open doors, saluting. The general checked his lapel.

“Sergeant,” he snapped. “Are you cleared to ride this elevator?”

“Sir, no sir!” The man was still saluting him. “I was waiting for that one.” He pointed with the hand not glued to his forehead.

“Where are you going?”

“Up, sir. I was going to-”

“Not anymore.” The general cut him off. “Get in.”

He was accustomed to taking orders. The sergeant

moved as if the general's words were his own thoughts. He stood there while the doors whooshed closed, obviously anxious but moving as little as possible. At least he wasn't saluting anymore.

"Sir," the sergeant stammered. "Permission to speak freely."

The general immediately regretted following the impulse to invite him along. The walk would be even longer than the elevator ride, and now they were both going to seem interminable. He sighed inwardly.

"What's on your mind, Sergeant?"

"I just wanted to say, sir." The sergeant straightened. "I am honored to serve under you. I requested this post. I consider you to be a fine example of our race, and I hope to learn as much as possible from your example."

"Our race?" The general furrowed his brow. "You mean humans?"

"Sir, no sir." The sergeant mirrored his confused look. "I mean African Americans."

The general shook his head. He hadn't even noticed the color of the other man's skin, not consciously. He didn't want to explain to this young man that that was the point, at least for him. The general wanted to walk in silence.

"That's an ethnicity, not a race," he responded curtly. "We're headed to research, not a press conference. These people are scientists, not politicians or internet trolls. They know that we all came from Africa, and that we all share the same phenotype. Racism to them means humans believing themselves to be better than other actual races, like the way our ancestors felt about neanderthals. If you want to learn, talk less from your point of view and listen more to others. Especially here."

As if on cue, the doors parted and the general stepped

out. He walked briskly, giving the other man no choice but to catch up or be left behind. The sergeant caught up as he paused at the first of many checkpoints. Bulletproof sheets of glass moved aside as he waved his hand over the screen. He motioned the sergeant through.

“Unauthorized entry,” a disembodied neutral female voice said calmly. “Sergeant Benjamin Taylor not cleared for entry.”

“Clearance code six-four-alpha-five,” the general announced. “He’s accompanying me on a training exercise.”

The voice did not reply, but the next set of doors opened silently.

“Central,” the general spoke up. “Where is Doctor Ryan?”

“Research lab three,” she answered immediately. “The laboratory is on lockdown, per the doctor’s orders.”

“Patch me through to him.”

There was no ring, or beep; just a moment’s pause before she announced the connection.

“General Roberts,” she said. “Doctor Ryan.”

“General?” His voice sounded strained and tense.

“Doctor Ryan.” The general spoke at normal conversational level. Central could pick up a pin drop in a hurricane, according to her creators. He talked calmly while walking as quickly as he could.

“What’s going on down here, Doctor? My secretary told me you put the lab on lockdown and said you would only talk to me.”

“You’re here, then?” The doctor nearly cried the words.

“Almost,” the general assured him. “We’re on our way.”

“Who’s with you?”

“Sergeant...” The general glanced at his lapel. “Taylor.”

“Who?” Now Ryan sounded confused as well as

anxious. “Never mind. Is he armed?”

The general paused in his thoughts, and in his steps. “We’re both armed, Doctor. And we’re here.”

The general could see him through the thick glass. Ryan had his back to them, and he turned at the words. There was obvious relief on his face, and he stepped to the lighted screen on the other side of the glass to put his hand on it.

“Open doors for five seconds, then resume lockdown,” the doctor said loudly. “Authorization code-”

The glass slid aside, and he broke off.

The general stepped through immediately. The other man hesitated, and the doors slid shut just after he slipped through them.

Ryan frowned. “I’m not sure you want him to see this.”

The general remembered all the other times Ryan had been dramatic about something. He had found himself peering into a microscope, or at a lighted screen, staring at some swirl of colors or line of numbers that were as incomprehensible as the scientist’s accompanying explanation. Ryan had never put the place on lockdown, but he did get a little too excited about his research from time to time. It had been part of what had prompted the general to ask him to buy him a beer after work, all those beers ago. The general didn’t talk about his job, except to be grateful for it; Ryan was obsessed with his work. More than once the general had hushed the other man in a crowded bar, laughing while he reminded him that the topic of conversation was top secret.

“It will be fine,” the general assured Ryan. “We are all aware that only half of this facility is a matter of public record. As far as the world is concerned, we are all just prison guards here. We house political and religious prisoners of war, and that is the only thing we do. All of our research

is done in a facility that does not exist by doctors that officially work at other sites in other capacities. Technically, Doctor Ryan, you're not even here, nor is there a here in which to be. Officially, nothing that happens down here actually happens; it's why you have carte blanche when it comes to what and how you research. Surely our young sergeant is aware of all of this."

The sergeant was listening, wide-eyed while the general spoke. When the words ended with a calm proclamation about his nonexistent knowledge, he only hesitated for a moment. Then, he nodded. He looked as frightened and anxious as Ryan when he did.

"Sir," the sergeant gulped. "Yes, sir."

The general turned to Ryan. "Show us."

"Well, first I have to tell you," he responded. "You need some context before you see anything."

"Talk fast, then," the general said, glancing at his watch. "I have meatloaf waiting. And use words that we might actually understand wherever possible."

"In all seriousness, this will make waiting on Tina's meatloaf well worth it, General." The doctor was falling into his usual measured vocal cadence. The general shook his head, in disapproval at the personal concession, and in disbelief. Ryan had tasted Tina's meatloaf; this must be serious indeed.

"Okay, Chris," Roberts replied. "Then tell us."

"You know, of course, that there is a genetic sequence coded into every human's DNA that is dormant," the doctor began.

"Let's just assume we don't know anything," the general smiled.

"Well, everyone should know that," Ryan scoffed. "If you're going to carry extra genetic baggage around

everywhere, you should at least be aware of it.”

“We are carrying extra genetic material?” The general frowned. “As baggage?”

The doctor waved his hand. “Of course not; I’m using layman terminology, as requested. It makes more sense when I can just say that there is an inactive section of the human DNA strand that appears to serve no actual purpose.”

“Is that exciting news?” the sergeant asked. Apparently he was paying even less effective attention than the general.

“Of course not!” the scientist cried. “Everyone knows that!”

The general allowed himself a small smile.

“Doctor Ryan,” he said calmly. “Please proceed.”

“Of course,” the doctor retorted, giving the sergeant one more disgusted glance before going on. “I have always been curious about this inactive code. I have long had a theory that this is not the first time that a race has developed genetic material that is a blueprint for change. Environmental and social pressure may cause it to appear, although the cause of the phenomenon is irrelevant if the code cannot be activated. The change must be studied if we are to determine the direction that nature is trying to take us.”

The sergeant looked from the scientist to the general, his face a frowning mask of confusion. The general frowned inwardly; he rested his hand on the butt of the pistol holstered at his side.

“Did you say change?” The general spoke cautiously.

“Yes!” Ryan nodded effusively. “Change, as in physical transformation. I am saying that a physical transformation is locked inside of our genetic coding.”

“That’s impossible,” the sergeant blurted.

“Tell that to a caterpillar,” the general said. “Or a wild boar. Or a grasshopper.”

Ryan nodded again. “They may believe you; but come back in two weeks and try to convince the butterfly, or the domesticated pig, or the locust. They would laugh in your face, if they could. Physical transformation is not just possible; it is inevitable. It generally takes generations, but not always. Look at the wild boar, misnamed as it may be, since a boar is a male; how could a species survive without females? Heh, heh. Anyhow, it is again common knowledge that there is no difference between a domesticated pig and a wild boar, at least genetically. Physically, they are profoundly different animals; but that difference is due entirely to their environment. Take a wild boar from the wild and its tusks will disappear; it’s skin will go from rough to smooth. The coarse hair that covers its body will be almost entirely shed, and what little remains will be light and soft. It’s attitude will change, and the aggressive wild boar will literally become a docile farm animal within a couple of weeks.”

“The reverse is true as well,” the general added. “Send a domesticated pig into the woods, and it will grow tusks and hair and armor-like skin.”

“That is actually where my theory began,” Ryan mused.

The general looked at his watch, heard his belly grumble, and nodded for him to go on. His hand still rested lightly on his sidearm, and he was turned so neither the sergeant nor the scientist could see.

“According to what we know of the past,” Ryan explained, “neanderthal and modern man lived at the same time, in the same areas. Science would have us think that we interacted, that we warred with each other until modern man wiped out the entire species somehow. My theory

entertains another possibility, one that better explains how neanderthals went from being everywhere on Earth to being nowhere on Earth in such a startlingly short period of time.”

“They became us,” the general breathed, his hunger forgotten.

“Precisely!” Ryan beamed. “What if neanderthals began to cultivate crops and raise farm animals only to find that it changed more than just their lifestyle? What if neanderthals were the wild boar to our pig, and in the process of domesticating themselves they became us? What if the reason many of us have neanderthal DNA is not because we occasionally bred with them, but because we used to be them?”

“That’s a lot of ‘what-ifs’,” the sergeant commented.

“That’s what science is, you fool,” Ryan sneered. “Most of what you believe about the world is some agreed-upon ‘what-if’; what you call facts, we call theories. Science as a whole is much more interested in appearing right than in actually being correct. Every generation that comes up through the ranks sees the fallacy in the thinking of the previous generation. Any attempt to correct this thinking is quickly shut down, and the young idealistic scientist is forced into decision: either begin your career in a cloud of ridicule from nearly every respected and established researcher in your field, or toe the line and wait for your elders to pass on so that knowledge can evolve.”

Ryan chuckled. “Of course, at that point you become the dinosaur. You’ve spent a lifetime getting an idea you had twenty years ago in the books, and the last thing you want is some young genius supplanting the theory with a better one. So you call it ‘fact’, and you support the ‘facts’ of other accredited dinosaurs so they will support yours;

and actual scientific inquiry crawls along at a snail's pace on your broken back."

"Or," the general cut in, "you find a facility not bound by the restrictions of law and not threatened by a lack of funding."

"Right," Ryan bobbed his head in happy agreement. "Or that."

"Which leads us to the reason we came here, I presume."

"Of course!" Ryan beamed, then abruptly grimaced. The next words from his mouth were not spoken with the excitement that had driven his ideas before.

"My discovery," he murmured, still frowning.

A primal howl split the air; some animal crying out in hunger, or some human who had long relinquished the last vestiges of their humanity releasing a lifetime's torment in one anguished scream. It lasted for several long, painful seconds. The sergeant shuddered. Ryan cast an annoyed glance over his shoulder, toward the sound. The general unsnapped the strap of leather that held his sidearm in place, and tucked it between the holster and his belt.

"It was recently discovered that when grasshoppers become locusts, they have a marked increase in serotonin just before the transformation." Ryan spoke slower now, and lower. "We have always known that environmental conditions trigger it, drought or the increase of vegetation in the rains afterward, possibly temperature changes. Yet humans have gone through all of these conditions without metamorphosis. There has never been any indication that severe environmental conditions of any kind would trigger the dormant DNA in people."

"What about massive doses of serotonin?" the general asked.

"Precisely! Well, not serotonin, but a similar chemical

found naturally in most mammalian species.” The doctor was his excited former self for a moment; then another hungry howl split the air. He rubbed at the prickles that were surely standing up on the back of his neck and opened his mouth to continue.

“Doctor, please,” the sergeant whispered. “What is that?”

His eyes were wide with wonder, or terror, and the sergeant turned to move uneasily toward the sound.

“Well, it’s not a butterfly,” the doctor frowned. He followed the sergeant as his steps brought him to a sealed steel door. Ryan glanced at the general, and he nodded. There was no going back at this point.

Ryan put his hand over the lighted screen. The steel slid aside, and the general almost had his gun in his hand before he realized that it wasn’t time. He relaxed and followed them up a short hallway. There were three rooms along it, each sealed behind bulletproof glass in an airtight vacuum. Each lab had three such rooms, able to contain sickness or violence or other things less easily explained. The general passed the first room as the sergeant approached the third, and he saw that it was empty. He heard the disgusted sounds of fevered chewing; they stopped as Ryan pressed a lighted circle on the pad that was mounted to the door frame. He heard the sergeant cry out.

“Simms!” he shouted. “Simms, is that you? Are you okay?”

The sergeant whirled on Ryan just as the general reached his side. He had made note as he passed; the second room had been empty as well.

“That’s my man in there!” the sergeant shouted, looming over the doctor menacingly. The general moved between them before glancing over his shoulder at the third

room.

There were actually two men in there, if you wanted to call them that. One was nearly naked, the hospital gown that he was wearing thrown over one wide shoulder like a cape. His limbs seemed unnaturally long, and the muscles were stretched taut over them in what looked like a painful way. If he had skin, it had become the transparent sheath that held in the vast bloodied network of fat and vein clinging to his exposed sinew; more likely the only parts of its skin still remaining were the ghastly hunks of it that hung from him, swinging with his movements.

The general couldn't see his face, buried as it was in the other man's bloodied mess of a torso. He could see that his fingers were more like talons, as they raked fresh red dashes across the other man's chest and face; he could see that his gown and arms and neck were covered in blood, and that it was splashed about the room. The general could see something else: the other man was also different, having gone through some unique metamorphosis of his own.

Lying on his back, the other man's clothes were the bloody and tattered remains of base-issue fatigues. The general didn't recognize him, but he would have if the troop had been familiar. His face was mostly human, except for the grayish skin, rusted red eyes and sharp biting teeth that he was showing every time he would lift his head from the floor. He wasn't grimacing in pain, or fighting the other man off; instead he lay on his back, a puddle of his own blood on the tiled floor around him. He seemed to be writhing with pleasure, and his hand was on the back of the other man's head as he buried his face further into his guts.

The troop being eaten lay his head back on the floor. His skull lolled with apparent pleasure; if the general squinted enough, it looked as though the two of them were

both thoroughly enjoying a spectacularly intimate moment. As he watched, the one doing the eating pulled his face from the purple and red mess of his meal and looked up at the man he had been chewing on. The troop lifted his head from the floor, smiled a dreamy sharp-toothed smile at the other man, and pressed his head back into the open cavity of his own belly.

“Simms!” The sergeant moved past the doctor and the general to press his hands against the glass.

“He can’t hear you,” Ryan said calmly from behind him. “Nothing gets in or out of these chambers unless we want it to, even sound.”

The sergeant pounded on the glass. The ghastly pair went on eating and being eaten. He whirled on the doctor. Somehow he had his sidearm in his hand, although the general hadn’t seen him draw. He wasn’t pointing it threateningly at anyone, but holding it at the ready by his hip.

“Open this door, doctor,” the sergeant gritted through clenched teeth.

Ryan lifted an eyebrow, more curious than afraid. He glanced at the general. The general let his gaze drift from the sergeant to the grisly scene behind glass to the scientist. He nodded.

The doctor shrugged, then placed his hand over the lighted screen. The door slid aside, and the sergeant moved into the room. As soon as his foot cleared the doorway, he began shouting; at the same time the general placed his hand over the control panel.

“Get away from him, you-” The sergeant’s words were lost as the door slid shut behind him. The general moved closer to the glass and the doctor, and they watched. At the sound of the sergeant’s voice, the creature that had been

on all fours eating the other raised his head. He turned his face to the sound, and even the general gasped at the sight.

All of his teeth were sharp and jagged, and he was still chewing on some piece of the other man. As his mouth opened and closed around the bloody glob, the general saw that there were several rows of those teeth. They were tilted slightly inward to better mash and push large chunks of flesh through the carnivorous maw. His skull had taken on a helmet shape, and thick bony ridges shaped his eye sockets and jaw. His eyes had become swirling slits the color of blood and sand hidden in the hollows of his bony brow. His skin was gone, or changed to transparency, and the general could see the muscles of his jaw working feverishly to rend the flesh in his mouth.

The sergeant's first bullet ripped through the creature's chest as it rose, and the second and third weren't far behind or far away. By the time he reached his full height, a half-dozen holes riddled the thing's broad sinewed naked chest. No blood flowed from the wounds, and the general could see globs of red and white streaming across the network of muscle and fat to fill the holes. The monster was whole again as he stepped toward the sergeant.

"Shoot it in the head, you fool," the general murmured. He didn't notice the doctor turning to look questions at him. It was as if the sergeant heard, although the next flashes of gunfire were as silent on this side of the glass as the first had been. He lifted the muzzle and shot the monster three times in the face. The first two bullets ripped shallow holes in his forehead as they glanced off, but the third plunged between jagged rows of teeth to bury itself deep in the creature's mouth.

No one had noticed that the man on the floor had sat up while the creature was rising and advancing. As the

monster went down, he lifted himself shakily to his feet. His own innards cascading from his belly, he wobbled and slipped in the blood at his feet. The sergeant rushed forward to catch him, wrapping arms quickly about the other man's gory middle. All of the falling man's weight went into the bite that he sank into the sergeant's shoulder, and a burst of hot wet blood covered his face. They went down together, on top of the fallen monster, and half of the sergeant's shoulder was gone by the time they hit the floor.

They watched the sergeant's silent screams from the other side of the glass, as the monster rose from the floor to join in the feast. They watched the half man become a full monster as he tore sinew and fat from bone, watched teeth form and flesh drip from his body. Within a minute they were watching two nearly indistinguishable creatures hovering hungrily over the sergeant; then the sergeant opened his eyes, and he began to change as well. His eyes went from a deep brown to a rusted red, and his skin went from light chocolate to dead ashen gray. He went from fighting them off to opening his arms to them, and soon he was embracing a creature in each arm while they feasted on his flesh.

"You've seen this before." Ryan's voice was accusatory.

The general sighed. He turned to his friend.

"I have," he admitted. "A long time ago. The few people who know about it would say that it's the reason for these stars."

He tapped his lapel with the hand that was not resting on the butt of his pistol. He shrugged.

"I couldn't disagree," he admitted further.

"What the hell is it?" The doctor had his eyes on the grisly scene once more. He didn't seem to notice the general moving away from the glass, positioning himself behind

the scientist.

“It’s a zombie,” the general answered. “At least that’s what we called them. It seemed appropriate; their bones become like steel when they transform the second time, and all of their important organs move behind the protective armor of the solid ribcage. They have irregular heartbeats that seem to originate in their brain casing, and that is harder to puncture than the armored ribcage. The only way to kill them is to cut off their heads, or sufficiently stir whatever part of their brain that is still functioning with a very well-placed shot. Their bite transforms humans into a zombie type two; the type two is then overcome with a hunger for human flesh. At its first taste of it, it becomes a zombie type one.”

Ryan whirled on him. “You studied these things?”

“I didn’t.” The general shook his head. “I was there with the people who did. It was nearly twenty years ago. The scientists working on the project insisted that the entire population needed to be heavily dosed with a drug that would regulate certain neurotransmitters. They suggested putting it in public water supplies, and advertising it as a fashionable and legal drug under various guises.”

“Wait a minute,” Ryan frowned. “Are you talking about-”

“I don’t know what I’m talking about, Doctor,” he shrugged. “At least not to the depths to which you would like to discuss it. I know how to kill them. I know not to let them bite me. That’s all I need to know.”

Ryan went back to watching the two type ones dine on the type two. His eyes were wide with wonder, round at the amazing new discovery that had created such a horrific scene on the other side of the glass.

The general’s feelings for the man were not new, nor

were his memories of him few. That didn't change what he had to do, however. The general unholstered his pistol silently and put two hollow point bullets in the back of the scientist's skull. Blood sprayed across the glass, and the sudden flash of red caught the attention of the monsters on the floor. Two of them began to rise as he palmed the door open, and eight more shots rang out before they could take a step. Their eyes were bursts of blood as they went down together.

On the floor, the sergeant rolled in a mess of his own flayed flesh and dripping guts in an attempt to stand. The general put the muzzle of his fifty caliber pistol an inch from the sergeant's brain and pulled the trigger two more times. The first time, a hole opened in the the sergeant's face, and he fell forward. The second pull was a quiet click that his ringing ears couldn't hear, as the slide on the pistol locked open. He was out of rounds.

The general swept the room with his eyes, making sure they were all inert. He dragged the doctor's corpse into the room with the others, and closed the door on the whole bloody mess.

"Central," the general said. He couldn't tell if his voice was a shout or a whisper, or if the disembodied voice responded; all he could hear was a distant dull ringing in his ears. He went on anyway.

"Message my secretary and tell him to bring my lunch down here." He sighed, and had another look at the pile of bloodied corpses in various stages of strange decay; suddenly he felt very old. "And message my wife. Tell her I'll be here all night."