

Thursday Prompt: 08-07-2025

Girl Gone Active

Why is it that bad news always drops on a Friday morning? That's when the government releases shitty economic numbers, the city closes the Loop so they can prune those damned supertrees, or when businesses send you meeting invites with HR so they can "break some bad news" to you. But in my case, it was none of the above. It was a phone call.

They restrict personal devices on the assembly floor for safety reasons. Getting your ticket punched by an industrial robot welder going through its KR tests because you were swiping is a stupid way to go. I tried to keep my head on a swivel whenever I was on the floor, partly for safety, but mostly because of the old-school ear protection I wore. The noise levels in the robotic assembly area were punishing, and hearing damage was a guarantee if you weren't careful. But today we were putting one of our biggest industrial construction units through its paces, so I had to maintain my focus. My eyes flicked between the company tablet in my hands and the whirling, gyrating machine before me. That's why I didn't see the woman approaching from behind.

I twitched in surprise when someone lightly tapped my arm. Turning, I saw Kinsey, our office assistant's intern, all decked out with brand new safety glasses, noise-canceling earplugs, and a hardhat with the company logo emblazoned across the front. She looked up at me, balled her fist with the pinky and thumb jutting out, and held it to the side of her head. *Phone call.*

My eyebrows rose. "Seriously?" I mouthed, but saw the look on her face. *Yeah, seriously.*

Handing the tablet off to the cell leader standing next to me, I reluctantly followed the college kid back to the front office, banging through the two steel doors that separated Service and Assembly from the posh, air-conditioned Sales and Management offices. We doffed our safety gear at the equipment racks, hers shiny new, mine scuffed and worn, and made our way into the admin offices.

"What's up, Kinsey?"

"There's a 'Hannah' on the line for you, sir," she replied, leading me into a cramped, efficiently appointed temp office. Desk with terminal and phone, small book case, guest chair, institution-green walls, checkered tile flooring. No windows, no plants. A single overhead LED panel bathed the room in a perfectly tuned outdoor spectrum. "Claims she's your niece? She described you exactly, right down to the—" she traced a line down the side of her cheek. "She says it's an emergency."

I felt the pit of my stomach sink. "What happened?" I scoured the girl's desk, saw the phone on standby mode. "She still online?"

Kinsey nodded and handed me the set, then made a discrete exit, closing the door behind her.

Taking a breath to steady myself, I put the thing to my ear. "Hannah?"

A little voice. "U-uncle Scar?" She hadn't called me by that name in over a decade. "I think... Uhm... I think I need help. I... I took the test. *Twice!* A-and both times it came back positive. It says the virus has gone active in me, Uncle Scar!" She sobbed. "Oh, *fuck*, I'm gonna Change!"

Change. A viciously simple word used to describe the most extraordinary event in the history of humanity, if not the natural world: the engineered emergence of a new species from our own. Or did they call it a new branch of our own species? Not sure. Those science shows always put me to sleep.

For those families affected by the Change it meant one thing: someone you knew and loved was going to be taken from you and forever altered. Transformed into something resembling a creature from myth.

A dragon.

But it always happened to *other* people, though. Sometimes you heard about a coworker who had a relative, or a drinking buddy, or a neighbor, whose virus went active. They met some set of mysterious physiological and genetic triggers that scientists were still trying to figure out, and their virus woke up, started doing its thing. Triggering a cascade of directed mutation in an unnaturally precise, choreographed dance of gene activation, tissue and bone modification, growth and—

And now it was happening to my niece.

It felt like someone punched me in the gut. I let out an involuntary grunt, leaned forward and pressed my fist against Kinsey's desk. "Okay," I said, mind racing, heart pounding. "Okay, let's take this one step at a time. Is the... Are the test kits expired? Did you check the expiration date on the packaging?"

She sniffled and I heard rustling in the background. "The date on the side says it expires two years from now."

"Okay. And the kits you ran... Both kits came from the same package?"

"Uh-huh... Please, Uncle Scar, can you come pick me up? I mean..."

I closed my eyes, desperate to think up a way this couldn't be happening. "And the instructions? Hannah, did you follow the instructions on the kits exa—"

"Of course I followed the fucking instructions!" she snarled, then fell silent. A moment passed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to. But..." I heard her take a slow, calming breath. "Uncle Scar, there's something on my back. Like a rash. I remember that from the documentaries about the first few people who Changed. That's when I knew I had to take the tests."

"Describe it, please." I pulled out Kinsey's office chair and collapsed into it, absently stroked the old scar that ran down my right cheek. "The thing on your back. Describe it."

"I noticed it a couple days ago. It was really small then, but it's been spreading. Fast. Dark brown, almost red. Sort of leathery-feeling? Not like scales. Feels really warm. And there's these weird wrinkly flaps on it." She paused. "It's Scalepatch, isn't it? What I've got on my back? That's, like, the first sign the Change is really happening?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it is. Any other symptoms? Increased appetite? Sensitivity to light? Fever?"

She sniffed and coughed. Or maybe it was a laugh? “Oh yeah. Fever’s been around a hundred since Tuesday, so I’ve been staying home, even though I don’t feel sick. Just hot. And I’ve gone through all the meats and protein bars in our apartment, and had some extra delivered from the store yesterday. Ate all of that, too. I’ve emptied the fridge and pantry, except for the greens. Those’re nasty. And I’ve got all the drapes closed and the lights turned off. Uncle Scar, the last time I looked at myself in the mirror—I swear to God—my pupils reflected like... *like a cat’s!*”

“Where’s your mom, Hannah? You called her, right?” My sister and I weren’t on the best of terms. That Hannah called me instead of her own mother told me things were “complicated” at home, too. Still, complications be damned, her mother needed to know.

“I think Beth is doing a client visit. She left this morning with her yoga mats and chakra alignment tools, or whatever the hell that crap is called.” I heard the bitterness in her voice.

“Okay, Hannah,” I said, pushing up from the desk. “I’m on my way. It’ll take me about thirty minutes to get to your place, alright?”

“Okay.”

“In the meantime, there should be a phone number on the outside of the test kit...”

“Activation Hotline number. Yeah. Damn thing’s printed everywhere you look these days. I’ll call it.”

“Good. Find out which hospital they want us to drive to. I’ll pick you up, you tell me where we’re going, and we’ll drive straight there, okay? In the meantime, don’t go anywhere. Not even outside for a smoke. Don’t open the door to anyone, except me or your mom.”

She swallowed. I could’ve sworn I heard her nodding on the other side of the line. “Okay. Okay, yeah. Thanks, Uncle Scar.”

“We’ll get through this, Hannah,” I said, putting as much confidence into my voice as I could. “And, Hannah?”

“Yeah?”

“After you’ve called the Hotline, call your mom. She needs to know. Tell her which hospital we’re going to. Tell her we’ll meet her there.”

“Okay. Okay, I will.” She sniffled, then said in a choked voice, “Love you!”

The line went dead and I slotted the handset back in place. Blew out a breath. Opened the door. Kinsey was there—had she been eavesdropping?

“Hey,” I said. “Look. Uh. I’ve got an emergency situation at home. Mark me out for the rest of today and tomorrow, okay? I’ll call the director and fill him in when I can.”

Without waiting for her response, I headed for the nearest exit.