

KREATR

By Emily Lind

Fish #3742 was the most remarkable creature to ever have existed. Not that It knew.

As It swam through the molten lava stream of an underwater volcano, completely unscathed, It was primarily concerned with finding something to eat. Unknown to Fish #3742, the proteins of Its metabolism survived the thermal stress completely unharmed, while Its tissues repaired all damage instantaneously.

Fish #3742, unknowingly next-to-immortal, continued until It encountered what we would recognize as a DollaKwik plastic bag, and was temporarily entangled. #3742, thankfully, recognized the bag as dinner. In an instant the entire bag was gone, munched down and destroyed by Fish #3742's specially designed plastic-metabolizing digestive system. What energy #3742 didn't immediately expend was stored away in fat and glycogen with dizzying efficiency. #3742's energy stores had come in handy when It had swum through the coldest place on Earth (which, surprisingly, was now just off the coast of Turks and Caicos). The constant barrage of ice in the -20°C , extremely salinated water would have killed It, had Fish #3742 not been full of transgenic antifreeze proteins which had originally evolved in a long-horned beetle.

Overall, it was a good thing that Fish #3742 could eat plastic; many of the other critters It encountered were virtually indestructible, although predators were quickly developing ways around this barrier. The prey were matching these developments in a neo-cold war of rapid evolution. If Fish #3742 had been able to venture onto land, or even see beyond the water into the sky, It would have known that this arms race was not isolated to the oceans. Indeed, there was a whole Tree of Life full of bizarrely adapted (and adapting) creatures teeming everywhere around the world. Unknown to any of these lifeforms, they had come into being on the planet formerly known as Earth through extraordinary means. Climate change had, well, changed everything from ecosystems to the economy. Even volcanic eruptions had become more common, thanks to the reduced weight of the polar ice caps changing the movement of tectonic plates.

Surprisingly, the biggest problems all stemmed from the same source — the extinction of keystone species. No one cared about the North American beaver until water supplies dried up, or about the hummingbirds until none of the plants got pollinated. Or worst of all, when the Prairie dogs went under (for the last time), and the hungry wolves came hunting for humans.

The now-extinct species known as *Homo sapiens* had let the problem go on for far too long. By the time they tried to turn off the stove, the pot had already overboiled. What were they to do? Surely this wasn't all their fault. No, the problem was that these lowly creatures simply couldn't evolve fast enough.

The solution was terrifying in its simplicity: Just genetically engineer the species so they could remain useful in this newly changed climate. If the turtles are choking on plastic, engineer them a new digestive system so they can eat it instead. If the Alaskan tree frog can't find a mate, make it hermaphroditic and self-replicating. And if a species doesn't have the required gene, why not swap in another from a different organism?

And so, the Keystone Repopulation And Expansion through Applied Transgenic Research Program was born. The title (like the work of all government-appointed committees) was clumsy and ill-conceived. It was soon simply called the KREATR Program. Each participating country selected a handful of critical species to genetically 'perfect' to survive the predicted and unpredictable impacts of climate change. Virtually all available funding was diverted towards KREATR projects, which soon set about producing the most fantastic Frankensteinian life forms

ever imagined.

Granted the ability to digest most human-made substances, KREATRs could survive famine and eat virtually anything. KREATRs were engineered with unbelievably thermostable proteins, allowing them to tolerate extreme heat. These mass-produced monsters could even survive the vacuum of space, thanks to a few choice genes from a tardigrade.

Best yet, KREATRs were made with RapidEvo™ technology, allowing them to adapt to changing environments within minutes of exposure. One researcher even had the idea to build KREATRs with the ability to freely exchange genetic material, maximizing the acquisition of helpful genes.

What could go wrong?

Unlike most enterprises in human history, the problem with the KREATR program wasn't that it failed.

The problem was that it worked.

Within mere months of the release of the KREATR organisms, humanity was overrun (and overswam, and overflowed) by nearly-indestructible creatures. After centuries of factory farming and overly-maintained golf courses, Mutant Mother Nature finally had the upper hand. A human city could survive a few hundred racoons, several thousand pigeons and other run-of-the-mill wildlife. A city could not, however, withstand the hordes of perfectly evolved, perfectly adapted, rapidly expanding populations of KREATRs.

The exact particulars of how the species formerly known as *H. sapiens* had finally disappeared were unknown to Fish #3742. Aquatic life forms are not known for record keeping. All It knew was that It had plenty to eat, rarely encountered any threats, and occasionally (spontaneously) gave birth to new clones of Itself.

Perhaps in several million years, a descendant of Fish #3742 would take its first fledgling 'steps' onto dry land, evolving — after a few millennia — into something vaguely humanoid. Perhaps these beings, after another dozen centuries, would discover traces of (un)intelligent design in their genomes and attribute this to some divine entity, rather than the chaos of creation.

Perhaps not.