

"DEAD START"

A short screenplay

by

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FADE IN:

INT. PHARMATEK BOARDROOM - DAY

SUPER: THREE DAYS AGO

We open in a plush, business-like boardroom, filled with typical executive suits, all sitting around a huge, conference table. Large windows overlook London and we can see the Thames winding towards Tower Bridge.

At one end of the boardroom, his back to the view, DOCTOR JEREMY CHARLES is pointing towards a large television screen, which is hanging from the ceiling.

We can see a CGI representation of cells dividing and interacting with other cells. A group of cells, highlighted in green is congregating around a particular area.

CHARLES

As you can see, gentlemen, the Regenerex virus has completely surrounded the cells of the lower brain stem, thus protecting the cortical system from intrusion.

He points to the green cells on the TV screen.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Regenerex has been genetically programmed to keep the brain stem alive, even if the subject's blood supply has been interrupted. In terms of the medical potential of this treatment, I can only guess, but my team estimates that the number of lives saved will be in the tens of thousands each year.

The executive sitting at the head of the table picks up a sheaf of papers and flicks through them noisily. He is WILLIAM PRICE, Chief Executive Officer of Pharmatek International.

PRICE

Dr Charles, you have been working on Regenerex for how long? Four years?

CHARLES

Five and a half.

PRICE

Five and a half years. My apologies. And in that time, this Board has received less than a few updates from you and your team. Considering the large sums of money Pharmatek is paying you, might I ask why?

Charles glares at Price, his hatred of the man painfully obvious.

CHARLES

Your predecessor granted me full autonomy for the duration of my research.

PRICE

Yes, well, Mr Rowland is not here any more, is he? I am and this is why I called for this presentation. Pete, would you mind?

Another executive, PETER SIMMONDS, seated close to Dr Charles at the far end of the table, clears his throat and leafs through some notes before speaking.

SIMMONDS

Dr Charles, Pharmatek employed you six years ago on the understanding that you would have Regenerex available to our customers within three years. Clearly, this has not been the case. In fact, after millions of pounds of shareholders' funds have been poured into your project, you are barely out of the R&D phase.

CHARLES

Our tests on various vertebrate species have been most promising.

SIMMONDS

Rats, birds, reptiles, cats and dogs. Yes? (beat) And in every case, the subject became uncontrollably aggressive. Is that a fair assessment?

CHARLES

There have been some setbacks, yes. But...

SIMMONDS

And there is also the slight problem with the Regenerex virus mutating into a contagion.

CHARLES

That's hardly the case.

SIMMONDS

I'm mistaken?

CHARLES

The virus has been known to spread between subjects, but those cases are rare and we take the strictest precautions.

SIMMONDS

And what happens to the virus after its function has been dispensed?

CHARLES

I'm not sure what you mean.

SIMMONDS

It's a simple question, doctor. What happens to Regenerex once it is no longer needed, say, after surgery?

CHARLES

The virus remains in the body indefinitely.

SIMMONDS

Indefinitely. Once introduced to a patient, they are, essentially infected with a virus that remains with them for life.

CHARLES

It's not a disease. It is completely benign.

SIMMONDS

Benign? That is not what your test reports suggest, doctor. In fact, your results to date indicate that you are nowhere near the stage where human trials might begin. To an outsider, these test subjects of your might look like zombies.

Charles laughs out loud, but stops when he sees that nobody else is laughing.

CHARLES

Look, we're not making zombies down there. I can assure you of that.

(pause) I appreciate how this looks, but this kind of research is, by its very nature, full of unexpected problems. We are dealing with very complex systems here. The brain, any brain, human or animal, is extremely complicated and it is expected that when we find one solution, another problem will arise in its place.

(pause) I'm sure, given more time, that we will iron out these difficulties and deliver your vaccine within a year. Two at the outside.

PRICE

That's what you told Rowlands six years ago, doctor.

Price stares at Charles for a long time.

PRICE

I'm sorry, Doctor Charles, but this Board has decided that, in the current economic climate, Pharmatek can no longer afford to fund your research. All test subjects will be destroyed and any and all research will be passed to our officers. If you wish to leave us, a generous severance package is in the table. If you wish to remain, I'm sure we can find work for you at one of our research centres.

CHARLES

That's it? Six years of work and you're pulling the plug? Are you fucking mad, Price?

PRICE

Please don't make this any more painful, doctor. You are a professional. You know that research projects are often curtailed. I appreciate what this has cost you personally, but...

CHARLES

But this is not just any research project! I have a chance to make history!

PRICE

You? This is not about you, doctor. This is about Pharmatek and its shareholders.

CHARLES

So, my presentation was for nothing, then? The decision had already been made. (pause) Fuck you, Price! And fuck all of you!

Charles storms from the boardroom, slamming the door behind him.

INT. CHARLES' RESEARCH BUILDING - DAY

Twin rows of cages, each containing a single animal can be seen. Most are rats, but there are also several cats, some small dogs and various other creatures. The room is oddly quiet.

Charles enters and the animals begin to mewl, howl, hiss and squeak loudly, as though his very presence agitates them greatly.

He walks down the double row and glowers into each cage. As he passes, the animal within launches itself at him, slamming into the steel mesh of the cage.

Finally, the doctor stops in front of a cage which contains a single, hissing black cat. Its eyes are blazing yellow and blood-flecked saliva drips from its jaws.

CHARLES

You'll do.

He turns around and grabs a carrying box from the top of the cages behind him. He opens the door and holds it against the cage. Charles pulls open the sliding door of the cage and the cat leaps out, straight into the carrying box.

Charles quickly slams the door shut and locks it. The cat can be heard hissing and thudding around inside.

CHARLES

Shut up, you little shit.

He heads towards the door as a TECHNICIAN enters.

TECHNICIAN

Dr Charles. How did it go?

Charles ignores him and hustles past, throwing open the door and leaving the lab for the last time. The technician watches on.

TECHNICIAN

Tit!

INT. CHARLES' CAR - DAY

Charles glances down at the carrying box on the passenger seat of his car as it rocks from side to side. The cat is still hissing and scratching inside.

CHARLES

Don't worry, we're nearly there.

He looks forward again and we see he is entering a suburban neighbourhood.

EXT. LONDON SUBURB - DAY

Charles' car pulls to the side of the road on a leafy, suburban street. Detached and semi-detached houses line both sides of the road and numerous cars are parked both on the road and on the many private driveways.

Charles climbs out of the car, holding the carrying box. He walks calmly towards a house, pushes open the gate and strides up the path to the front door.

Pulling out a set of keys, he unlocks the front door and steps inside.

INT. CHARLES' HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Charles sets the box down on the kitchen worktop and sits down on one of the stools there. He stares through the mesh at the frenzied feline within.

CHARLES

They're right, you know. You're fucked up. More fucked up than they realise. Simmonds' zombie cat, eh?

The box jolts as the cat slams into the mesh. Charles recoils instinctively. He laughs a little nervously and stands, walking to the kitchen window and looking out towards the large garage in his back garden.

The cat slams into the mesh again and the hinges bend slightly.

CHARLES

Let them take my research. I'll continue on by myself. Fuck Price and his brown-nosing goons.

The cat throws itself against the mesh again and the hinges buckle a little more. Charles continues staring out of the window.

There is a bang and Charles turns around. His eyes widen as he sees the box lying on the kitchen floor, the mesh door wide open.

CHARLES

Shit the bed..

Suddenly the cat leaps into frame, sinking its teeth into Charles' face, its back paws clawing at his chest, shredding his shirt and staining it red.

He grabs the raging feline and rips it from his face, the deadly claws taking chunks of flesh with them. He screams in agony and throws the cat across the room. It lands on all-fours and turns, hissing at the wretched scientist.

Charles moans, looking at his bloody hands. The cat leaps again and Charles swings with his fists, clubbing the animal aside. It lands on the kitchen worktop, sliding into a rack of knives, upending them.

One of the knives slides towards Charles and he scoops it up. The cat hisses again and leaps once more. Charles thrusts with the blade and the cat screams as the steel digs into its abdomen.

CHARLES

That's right, you little fucker! Who's in charge now?

The cat drops to the worktop and Charles pulls out the blade. Then he furiously attacks the writhing beast, hacking at it with the kitchen knife. Blood spills everywhere and the doctor roars with victory, his eyes wide and deranged.

Finally, the cat lies still and dead, its innards splayed around its gory carcass.

Charles steps back and slips on the bloody floor. His head cracks on the edge of the stool and he slumps to the tiles, lying motionless in the blood.

EXT. CHARLES' HOUSE - AFTERNOON

A police car slows to a halt outside Charles' house. The sun is low in the sky, but it is still light. A pair of POLICE OFFICERS climb out and head up the garden path. An elderly WOMAN appears at the front door of the next house.

WOMAN

About time you arrived. I phoned hours ago.

POLICEMAN #1

Sorry, madam, but we are very busy at the moment.

WOMAN

There was an awful racket earlier on and then nothing. I hope Doctor Charles is alright in there.

POLICEMAN #1

Well, we'll see.

He knocks on the front door and they wait. No answer. He knocks again.

POLICEMAN #1

Doctor Charles? Are you in there?

From inside, we hear a low moan.

POLICEMAN #1
Is that you, Doctor Charles?

He tries the door and it opens. He glances inside and we see his POV. Through the hall, we can see blood on the kitchen floor and one of Charles' feet.

POLICEMAN #1
Gary, radio back and tell them to get
an ambulance here right away.

The other policeman steps back and begins talking into his radio. The old woman's hands go to her mouth. Policeman #1 pushes the door open and steps inside.

INT. CHARLES' HOUSE - KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

Policeman #1 steps into the kitchen and he gags at the smell and the sight of the disemboweled cat on the worktop.

POLICEMAN #1
Fuckin' 'ell!

As he looks at the cat, it twitches and an ululating mewl emerges from its bloody mouth. The policeman steps back in fright. His attention then falls upon the prone form of Charles on the floor. He kneels down beside the doctor.

POLICEMAN #1
Doctor Charles? Doctor Charles!

He reaches down and feels for a pulse on Charles' neck.

POLICEMAN #1
Shit. Poor bugger. (then shouts) Gary!
He's gone I'm afraid.

Suddenly, Charles sits bolt upright, his eyes yellow, his lips flecked with spittle. He grabs the policeman and before he can react, bites down hard on his exposed neck. The policeman screams and struggles, but Charles has a tight grip on him.

Policeman #2 comes running in, almost slipping on the blood that is now being added to by his partner. He shouts and gives Charles a vicious kick in the head.

The doctor sprawls across the kitchen floor. Policeman #2 begins pulling his partner out of the kitchen towards the front door.

Charles recovers quickly and screams at the top of his lungs. It is a terrifying, guttural noise, more beast than man. He lurches forward and bounds over the two constables.

EXT. CHARLES' HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Charles bursts out of the house, his face covered with blood, his fingers writhing and his eyes burning with rage. The elderly woman screams and rushes back indoors.

Charles sniffs the air and sprints into the street, screaming and hissing as we watch him running down the road towards the tall buildings of Central London.

FADE OUT.

THE END

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