

Chapter Twelve

Freund's Residence, Megiddo, Israel
1809 hours, 13 April 2036

Harrigan and Freund sat with iced tea on Freund's veranda, relaxed in the warm evening breeze, which carried the scent of Gertrude's roses and the chirp of grasshoppers. Freund's slight paunch pulled at a button, but Harrigan, still muscular at forty-two, felt no superiority. He hoped that a month's vacation, spent with the Freund and Strauss families, would relieve stress, and give him time to devise and present a saner research plan to Mon.

Freund yawned. "Ben's growing up fast. Tough lil' guy you've got."

Harrigan sighed and lowered his gaze to his glass. "I need to spend more time with him. Tykvah read me the riot act yesterday on that, sapiens treatment and trusting Mon. I felt like shit."

"She's the best thing that ever happened to you, bud. What are you gonna do? Quit, cut your hours? Keep at it and teach the Cro to love Neanderthals?"

"I might quit, or consult, but not until the current contract's up...and I can ease both clans into society. Shit...I don't know how...freakin' Cro...like a mirror! No wonder countries keep going to war. Anyway, Tykvah's right about Ben and this sapiens issue."

"And, Kevin, your pride keeps you from seeing Mon for what he is."

"I just can't agree, old friend. There's reason to trust Mon, if not Hassan and Najik. After all, he trusts me!" Harrigan grinned. "But – seriously – there's only so much I *can* do."

Harrigan stared silently at the pink, post-sunset clouds above the houses. For a split second, they looked like roses. He squinted and rubbed his tired eyes. "Thanks for taking me along to reconciliation and Mass, Mannie."

"Did you get anything out of them?"

"No," Harrigan laughed, revealing slighter crow's feet than Freund's.

Freund joined him. "Would you admit it if you did?"

Harrigan smiled wryly. "No, guess not."

"Dreams still bothering you?" Freund held his glass to his mouth.

Harrigan grimaced. "Yes. Let's not discuss that, okay?"

"Just asking. Touchy!"

"I need a rest, but I have to keep on. You know, Mannie, sometimes retiring sounds all right. Mon owes us his life and trusts me more than his staff. He responded to my note about a new contract and work after the park conversion but didn't address my other concerns."

"I don't trust him, Kevin. At all."

"Well, the Iraqis would steal whatever of our work they could, but they're no military threat. Even so, I've been tinkering with ways to mitigate our military work's value and increase security. I'm getting really tired of Najik's sneaky monitoring to impress superiors and arguing with me over safety and sapiens issues."

"I appreciate you fighting those battles, Kevin. Am I hearing things or are you trying to say that you might just hang it all up? Tell Mon and his bureaucrats to take a leap?"

"You kidding? We've only scratched the surface! You wanna quit?"

"No. Got the fever. Every time we discover something new, it raises more questions."

The two sat silently contemplating the fantastic mysteries they and their team had tapped.

"Mannie?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry I cut you off about my dreams. I think I've been spooked, subconsciously, by some of our discoveries and sometimes I think I see —" Harrigan cleared his throat, "strange pieces of evidence that keep falling into place, like Kora's memories and everyone getting M1-RNA through the Hebrew diasporas. And yet there's no proof of God or anything spiritual."

"If there were proof of God, you'd never ask for faith. And you need faith to open the eyes of your heart, to endure to the end. If he were overt, you wouldn't feel free to *choose*, defer your will to his. You would view sacrifice and repentance as a requirement, not an act of love."

"Mannie, I really did try this faith thing. There have been... times... when I thought I felt that 'whisper' you talked about. But I can't accept a few...unexplained occurrences or dreams as evidence of this spiritual world you say exists. Have you ever seen it, touched it, experienced it?"

"It touches *me*. God helps me accept it. Just ask for faith. He'll give it. But for that to be genuine, it must be a sacrifice of one's own imperfect will to God's. You cannot gain new life if you will not let the old one go."

"Too deep! New subject. I wanted to tell you: Tykvah helped me refine my genetic progression model."

"What does it predict?"

"It extrapolates our future genome, based on data we've assembled. It predicts that personality microsatellites cannot be added to each generation endlessly. Q-arms, especially, get so long the chaperone protein bonds lose stability. There's a definite number of generations before archived strands can no longer be added to the lengthening chromosomes. Past that point, M1-RNA stops adding new personality codes and starts breaking them down."

"Break down? As in random, freak-like mutation?"

"No. It triggers expression of the already-archived personality sequences, starting with the oldest and most fragile, cascading one generation after another."

Freund dropped his tea and did not reach to pick it up. "Do you mean to say that future generations could start producing copies of ancestors in the order of original occurrence?"

"That's the chemistry. Ended lineages regenerate because the process progresses from the most ancient sequences forward, creating all combinations similar to the prior generation but which did not already occur. It's just a computer projection."

Freund smiled nervously and reached for his glass.

"But there is one thing," Harrigan said, "that checks out perfectly with my lab trials."

"What's that?"

"The regeneration cascade can actually be triggered with the right vector and coding."

Freund stared at Harrigan. "Triggered? *Mein Gott!* What do you mean, 'triggered?'"

"I mean it produces a zygote. A targeted virus shell penetrates an egg, releases its instructions and sufficient M1-RNA to assemble genes from available nucleotides in the host and the virus. Once forty-three chromosomes are assembled, regular RNA gets produced. That shuts down M1-RNA, but the zygote keeps growing."

"Conception without sperm? How are archived personality genes targeted?"

"I've observed excess amounts of M1-RNA homing in on the archived gene markers that have the weakest bonds, the most ancient. M1-RNA expresses the oldest personality genes first."

"But wouldn't the cascade activate too many personality genes in one child?"

"No. Once those genes express, that segment of the chromosome produces hormones

that neutralize the M1-RNA near that segment – like an egg shutting out other sperm at the moment it's fertilized. Then the remnants of the M1-RNA mark that newly expressed gene for dormancy again. So, an M1-RNA cascade starts with baby number one, expresses the single most ancient set of personality genes, and halts. When that baby grows up to have kids, the *next-oldest* personality gene set gets expressed in *its* first child because that next set now has the weakest bonds. Progressive generations are all ancestors, and this starts from the most ancient."

"The Resurrection of the Dead! Kevin, this could endanger the whole human genome."

"Hey, stop worrying. Not just *any* tinkering with longevity genes would start this. Someone would have to put massive amounts of M1-RNA into partially denatured viruses that had the capability to both replicate and target the reproductive tract. Then they'd have to get a woman to breathe or ingest it. Sure, elevated M1-RNA would be a trait she'd pass to her descendants, and the virus itself could spread to people around her. But the placental barrier would keep the virus from infecting successive generations, so daughters would get pregnant in the usual way. Male progeny would develop a resistance and grow up normally. But initially, if men are exposed to too much... It's just that adult levels of testosterone change M1-RNA so that it shuts down longevity genes and codes for fast aging."

"It could kill the world's existing generation of men? Do the Iraqis know?"

"No, neither of these effects. Just you and I know its effects...even Tykvah hasn't seen this work. They want to steal the monopoly on prehistoric reproductions...Mannie, stop staring at me! The odds are so small...it just couldn't happen."

The next morning, Harrigan parked his rental car several blocks from the U.S. Trade Consulate in Megiddo and fumbled nervously with his phone. "Zip," he said in a level tone. He got out and walked circuitously uptown to enter the small concrete and glass office building. He was escorted to a windowless office where he requested a new phone. "They're still probing," he reported, "and they have a vector similar to what I use to target animal meiosis and –"

The agent leaned forward. "Can they mass-produce it?"

"Not possible. But they made a human-targeted version offsite, just not specific to any race or genetic group. I can't copy it for you. So, it's still not clear they want a weapon. Still, you'd better get eyes and ears more closely on my lab and Hassan's people. If they decode my human gene pool databases...they'll be able to target specific peoples and immunize their own."

"Any indication they're getting at that database, or working on mass production?"

"Well, neither. But that doesn't mean they're not."

"Leave analyzing intelligence to us, Dr. Harrigan. Next time, skip the cloak and dagger visit and use the phone. I'll file your...report. Thanks for saving the world, Double-oh Seven."

The following morning in Baghdad, Hassan's young Computer Science Chief had come in early to gain his attention. Hassan sat at his desk, read the report, and gazed up smiling. Hassan stood up and walked over to shake the visitor's hand.

"Thank you," Hassan said softly. "You have worked long and hard and this will not go unnoticed. You may go."

Hassan was on the phone before the young man had even left.

"This is Colonel Hassan. Give me the Premier."

A dark, stern face flooded the monitor. "Yes, Hassan, what is it?"

"Congratulations on your restructuring of the government, *Premier Mon*. The Congress and the presidency were worse than useless."

"What have you called me for, Hassan? I am quite busy."

"Sir, we have found and eliminated the deception that Harrigan has been using to hide his meiotic research. We can now identify and produce aging genes, genes for strength, intelligence, all of the traits you require! FGR is now available for our researchers to employ in genetic trait identification, removal, and insertion. By constructing and mass-producing virus vectors, we can even send programmed gene sequences into any host. We are very close, also, to being able to genetically immunize our own people so that their progeny will avoid recessive traits. Harrigan's coding has extra base pairs at some locations, like the Y chromosome's SRY gene. We are working to discover their functions, but we have had success with two female test subjects who had babies with defects we coded and two males who died of rapid aging."

"Excellent, Hassan. Are these delivery systems practical?"

"Yes, sir. But it will take refinement. We have debugged the duplicate FGR program and equipment here in Baghdad. We are on the verge of mass-producing the virus vector. It will kill males by fast aging if they are producing testosterone at adult levels. It also responds to several female hormones to seek and effectively fertilize any newly ovulated egg. These fetuses will mature rapidly, and with any of the several traits we desire. It can produce workers for your new order."

"Hassan, you have accomplished your assigned goals well, *if late*. I will remember you when the time comes. In your judgment, is there a reason to keep Harrigan and his staff?"

Hassan was about to thank Mon for what he misinterpreted to be an order to kill Harrigan and his staff. Before he could do so, an aide approached Mon and whispered into his ear.

Knowing not to listen in, Hassan depressed the volume button on his keyboard almost to mute and shouted exuberantly at his ceiling, "Yes! You dogs are *mine* now!"

Mon nodded at the aide and addressed Hassan. "I want Harrigan and his team kept on, just in case more useful discoveries can be obtained, and to avoid Western suspicion."

Hassan looked back at his monitor. Noticing that Mon was addressing him, he increased the volume slightly. Mon seemed distracted and impatient, so he repeated phrases he had understood.

"Yes, sir. 'Useful discoveries.' 'Avoid Western suspicion.'"

"Pay attention, Hassan! I must go. Well done!"

Mon turned and spoke with his aide as Hassan called after him, the volume still set low.

"Sir, I will move in anti-aircraft units since Al-Rajda's cover may be compromised without the foreigners."

"Uh. What? Yes, a fine job – though you *did* need the foreigners. Fix your phone before you call me again! Goodbye."

The screen went blank. Hassan grinned widely, satisfied that he had heard what he wanted. His voice took on a smooth, self-satisfied quality as he made his next call. "Al-Rajda Facilities Commander, please."

Najik greeted him. "Good morning, sir. How may I serve you?"

"Harrigan and his staff are no longer required. My people were always able to do this research. Finally, the Premier respects me! He wishes that they be disposed of. Permanently."

Najik's expression brightened. He leaned forward to the lens, causing the image of his face to fill Hassan's monitor. "Excellent, sir! It would be most practical to deal with the staff

tomorrow. The Harrigans and Freunds, however, are being monitored in Megiddo. They will return in four weeks. I trust the Communications Section will intercept and handle any calls they might make to their staff...until I have the Harrigans and Freund back here?"

"I will alert the Communications Section. You may conduct the operation as you wish and report success to me."

"Yes, sir. Will there be any change in the operation of the facility?"

"Maintain it as usual. Your technical contingent will grow, and the sapiens and animals will be useful. Also, I am posting an anti-aircraft battalion just south of Al-Rajda. Remember that you do not command it!"

Late that evening in the Neanderthal caves, Kora glanced from her sleeping mate, Rhahs, to her two young children in their grass-stuffed pelt beds. She noticed the familiar scent of roses outside and crept silently out, almost up to the cliffs. There she squatted on her shins, facing the forest. Her reddish blonde hair fluttered in the light breeze upon her furry shoulders and protruding brow. Starlight glinted off Kora's eyes as she began to tear, smiling and reaching outward toward the sparkling mist forming above the trees. The woods became silent as red roses appeared in a radiant fog just above the trees. A woman in a white dress and blue shawl emerged from the glistening vapors, holding out her palms as if embracing Kora.

Kora's eyes rolled back into their sockets. Her breathing became shallow, and her face began to reflect the shine. She listened inwardly to words that graced her, then responded in a tremulous whimper, her smile disappearing. "I fear! These ones I know not. Pain. Killing. Who are these? How could —"

Kora fell silent. Her smile began to return. Her shaky voice recovered and built into a sanguine proclamation. "You do the will of As-sun. I do as you ask: One last call to Friendli. This other witness I am to meet, a 'Temple Mount' I know not. There we will prepare the way. I will be not afraid."

Harrigan had been asleep beside Tykvah in Freund's guest room a mere two hours when his eyes shook wildly beneath their lids and his arms twitched. Sweat beaded on his forehead and intermittently rolled off into his slightly thinning hair. The image in his mind was simultaneously fearful and comforting. His lips began to move, and his shaky, gruff tone woke Tykvah. She listened, becoming more unsettled with each word.

"Must not let this be! So many will die. I can stop — I *will* fight this. Don't underst —" Harrigan was silent and his muscles relaxed. His eyes remained closed as suddenly his hands cupped his face, and he almost woke himself. His voice softened. "Another chance? I must choose...so soon mankind will...? I'm so blind...weak." Harrigan's eyes fluttered open.

He looked at Tykvah through the blur of tears and sat up into her embrace.

"Kevin, you're drenched, you're shaking! Bad dreams. It's okay now. I love you. Be calm, now. What was it?"

"Death," he whispered, pausing as she wiped a tear. Then words poured out. "Some horrible choice, and what we are, and the sapiens, and whether I can see..." He paused. "I can't remember," he said with resignation.

"I've nagged you about the lab work and the —"

"No, it's not you. It's faded. Gone. But everything is *not* fine, Tykvah. Not at all."

Harrigan's phone lit, 2307 hours, 14 April. It flashed an access alert he had programmed

his office computer to send when his files were accessed. He jerked his head up, then texted Freund and his CIA handler. "You and Ben stay here. I need to get Mannie and see what's going on at the lab. I'll return in a few days."

The next morning, the ten Al-Rajda staff members, eight children, and four spouses awoke to a loud announcement from Najik's adjutant, Major Bhaszdi, on their home intercoms. "Attention staff and families! A Kurd terrorist attack has been intercepted."

Within minutes, Bhaszdi rushed all foreign staff and families to the garage, forced them into the cargo holds of two tractors, and headed up the west escalator for the grassy plain. Two miles north, along the edge of the greening forest, the vehicles halted just within sight of the *Varanus priscus* burrow. The soldiers kicked the civilians out of the vehicles and dismounted.

From the concealment of the control seat in the sloth neck, Najik tested his signal emitter and received a hissing roar from the burrow. He had Bhaszdi line up his men facing the sobbing, frenzied group. The crowd began to slowly back away from the soldiers until they realized that they neared the monstrous reptiles. Suddenly someone in the back of the group fell, dropped down into the earth as if swallowed by it.

Najik grinned as the roar came, muffled at first, then loudly. The earth underneath the screaming civilians burst, tossing them outward from the eruption of soil. Soldiers stumbled backward as a *Varanus priscus*'s head thrust from the sod. The civilian who had dropped from sight onto its scaly neck was now ejected onto the grass with a thud. He scrambled to his feet and dashed to rejoin the others. The lizard sustained multiple gunshots but continued to clamber from its hole. Now its scaly tree-trunk legs and ripping claws pounded the ground as it rushed the soldiers. Najik cursed Bhaszdi as escaping captives yanked every child into the concealment of the trees.

The drivers jammed their tractors into reverse gear. The *Varanus priscus* swung its massive bulk, knocking a soldier down and then impaling him through the chest with a rear claw. It hissed and writhed as Najik tortured it with the signal emitter. The other soldiers trampled each other as they followed Bhaszdi into the tractors. The pair slammed the hatch against now-Sergeant Abrih and another pleading soldier and sped south.

Najik quivered violently, watching, and listening through a portal as now two of the giants yanked a soldier in opposite directions, bifurcating him. *How will I...Mission report...I'll put Bhaszdi's signature.... His...his mission accomplished. Records? I was on leave, yes, when he got the mission. His mind raced, plotted, and silently planned a fabricated report. How long can these people survive defenseless on the plateau? As for the Harrigans and Freund, they will come right to me in a month...just like the gloating surrogates! I can take my time sending out patrols to kill off all of these 'mice.'* Najik finally smiled and calmed, relieved to descend into the darkness of the west escalator.
