

Hordes

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Preface

A shadow shrouded in dark night moved against the grey mountain. In the cool sky above, the silver full moon hung behind thin clouds. The figure stood in the mouth of the cave for some time before walking onto the stone ledge far above the valley floor. Time stood still as the man scrutinized the valley below him. No lights showed there, nothing moved except the bone-dry dust swept up by the wind.

When he was sure there was no movement he turned and beckoned. From the cave behind him four more black-clad figures emerged. They also stepped to the edge of the stone ledge and stood looking out over the valley. Then four of the five drew back into the mouth of the cave. The remaining figure knelt at the edge of the stone, sat down and dangled his feet over the ledge. Below him a hundred-foot drop ended in rough stones on the valley floor.

The man looked up at the moon, seeming to lose himself in her light. Without taking his eyes off the silver ball he brought his feet up, untied the leather sandals and placed them on the cold rock next to him. With both feet once again over the edge he spread his toes, feeling the cool wind blowing on the hardened soles of his feet.

A bat turned against the light of the moon, its freedom bringing a smile to his face. Soon he too would be free. In the dark mouth of the cave the four figures stood waiting patiently. They were his friends. For years they had looked after each other, had helped the tribe to collect food and had seen men come and go. Those that came received, those that went gave back. He had arrived sixty years ago and had taken and enjoyed what they had to offer. For the past twenty years he had been their leader, but now it was time to go, and to give back as he had taken.

The breeze drifted up the side of the mountain, tickled through his toes and swept past his feet to where his knees were bare under the robe. He liked the feeling of balance. He had taken from many, he would give back to many. The figure sat on the ledge for a long time. When he stood up the moon had moved some way across the sky. He left his sandals lying on the rock, took two steps back and removed the robe. From behind him the other figures neared. Two of them now carried a large stone bowl filled with water, which they set down next to him before moving to stand at the edge of the precipice.

He knew the ritual. He knelt down and dipped his hands into the water. He cupped his hands and washed his face, then waited for his beard to dry in the cool night-breeze. Still kneeling, he washed his hands and forearms, taking time with the water, building a last remembrance of the world he lived in. When his hands were clean he sat down on the naked rock, washing his feet. He was becoming hasty now, eager to get it done with. He'd dealt with the fear of the night a long time ago, now only the act remained.

When he'd cleaned himself he stood up, turning to the four figures standing at the edge of the rock.

‘I am ready.’

The four figures turned around as one. The first one stepped up to him, hugged his naked form, let go and stood aside. Silence drifted as the second and then the third and fourth followed. When they were done the man kneeled on one knee, bending his head forward. One of the dark figures also kneeled, facing the man. He took the head of the man in his arms, holding him close. Two of the others stood on each side of the naked form, gripping his shoulders with firm but gentle hands.

The fourth figure dipped his hand into the folds of his robe. In the silver moonlight a long blade flashed through the night. There was no waiting. The deed had to be quick, without fear or pain to the man. With the quick movement the kneeeling black figure was left with the head of the man in his hands, blood spraying onto his robe. The other figures lowered the body gently, reverently laying it on the rock.

Four dark figures stood under silver moonlight, silently looking down at the body of Zenta. The meat from his body would be a feast for the tribe, while the head would be buried. They had fed him for sixty years, now he would feed them. It was the rite of the tribe.

When the time came, each one of them would have one night here on the ledge. But they were human. In an overpopulated world, they allowed themselves to have children. *They lived lives.*

But that was much later.

Book I

Chapter 1

Ishmael Jacobson pressed the send button on his email system, and within seconds his computer had sent the virus out to the world.

The computer virus would spread itself to the global email system, and it would tell people about his new, real virus. Within minutes the first people would open the mail, only to find a strange message inside. The attachment, which he had called “Old age”, was a text document which contained the whole process for creating the virus he called Morphoset. Within hours, the formula for the creation of the virus would be available to anybody in the world, free of charge, with authorities unable to stop anybody from trying to create a replica of his virus.

Using a mobile phone he called a friend. When a female voice answered he asked to speak to Mary, but was told Mary could not come to the phone. This was the confirmation that the e-mail had arrived at the friend’s house, and that she had opened the attachment.

He waited five minutes before phoning another number, while a feeling of euphoria crept over him. Above him, running in a circle around the laboratory, were windows from where a person could look down. At the moment there was only one person up there, a cleaner pushing a vacuum. He stared at these windows while the connection was made. After ringing twice the phone was answered by a male voice.

Still keeping his eyes on the windows he asked if he could speak to Mr Jogeramm. The male voice told him that Mr Jogeramm had moved out three months ago without leaving any forwarding address or number.

Another successful confirmation that his virus was spreading.

Ishmael switched off the mobile phone, removed the electronic phone card and placed it in a vial of acid. The liquid bubbled as the metal parts turned green and corroded. In a few seconds only the plastic slice was left. This he removed with a pair of tweezers and discarded into the waste disposal system, where it would be ashes in a few minutes.

From his shirt pocket he took a memory card and inserted it into the laptop computer. After disconnecting from the network he ran the program on the card.

Within minutes all data on the laptop had been destroyed.

There were thirty minutes left before his shift in the laboratory ended and the second night technician took over. He got up and made himself a cup of coffee, took it to his desk and sipped the warm brew slowly. Halfway through the cup of coffee he took a syringe containing a yellow fluid from his top drawer. He removed the plastic cap from the needle and placed the syringe on the table in front of him. From his shirt pocket he took a strap and fastened it tightly around his upper arm. Picking up the syringe again he tapped his arm, then plunged the needle into the vein that popped up.

It burned slightly as his thumb sent the plunger home, but he tried to relax. When the injection was in he stood up and took a plaster from his drawer, pulled the cover off and pressed the plaster firmly over the spot of blood on his arm before removing the strap. The syringe he took over to a Bunsen burner, took off the needle and heated it until it shone red-hot. He dropped the needle and the plastic syringe into a jar of spirits, waited a few moments and then took them out again, dropping them straight into the waste disposal system.

Before sitting down he changed his short sleeved laboratory coat for the long sleeved one, hiding the plaster on his arm. While he drank the rest of his coffee he thought about the virus he had engineered, which, at long last, was in his body. Ismael's face broke into a happy smile. There was nothing anybody could do to stop him now, the virus was in him.

The virus set to work immediately. Each viral organism entered a cell and started recording the DNA sequence of the cell. Slowly, the viral organism created a new DNA string within itself, an exact copy of the cell's DNA. Once this was done the virion created copies of itself, each with a perfect copy of the cell's DNA sequence trapped within it, and sent these copies out of the cell and into the body. The original viral organism would stay in the cell, to protect the host.

The replacement technician entered the laboratory. Ishmael stood up and left with his usual friendly greeting, giving everything on his desk a final check before closing the glass door behind him.

Ishmael Jacobson smiled. He'd put in his resignation a month ago, and would not be coming back. Instead he would join Doctor Vochnerr, who had a laboratory hidden in the African bush. The laboratory was in need of a scientist who knew how to create the new virus, a scientist who would not grow old and retire.

Ishmael Jacobson was just the man for the job.

Chapter 2

Inside the mask of the protective suit she was wearing, Carol Lindique sighed. She turned to Dr Holloway. 'Let's go over this once more,' she said. 'The virus was created with two sets of DNA, its own and a blank copy. When the virus enters a host cell it changes the blank DNA to look like the DNA of the host cell. Is that right?'

Dr Holloway nodded. 'Yes, that's exactly right.' He also wore one of the full-bodied protective suits.

Carol leaned forward, looking at a computer image of what the microscope was seeing. 'And it also starts to make copies of itself?'

'Yes,' replied Dr Holloway. 'The copies that it creates won't have the blank DNA string though, they will each have a copy of the host cell's DNA.'

Carol kept her eyes on the screen, but continued asking questions. 'And you say that the virus doesn't kill the host cell, but protects it instead?'

Again Dr Holloway nodded. 'Yes. After releasing the copies it created, one virion will stay in the cell to protect it, and the rest will travel to the other cells in the host's body. In this way each cell in the animal's body will become infected with the virus.'

'And this one virus, or virion, will see to it that the cell's DNA never mutates?' Carol turned her head to Dr Holloway.

'Very good!' Dr Holloway smiled. 'By making sure that the DNA never mutates, the virus stops most of the aging process in the animal. The virus is also ferocious, it will kill any other virus that tries to enter the cell. This gives the host protection from both age and disease, so the virus turns from a parasite to a symbiotic creature.'

Behind the suit's plastic facemask Carol frowned. 'So if the virus is good, why does it also kill?' she asked.

Holloway turned his chair to face her. 'Once the virus has created the DNA that corresponds to the host cell's DNA, it will change any cell it comes into contact with to reflect the host DNA inside itself. That means if a virus has host DNA that looks like mine, and it lands up in one of your cells, it will change your cell to look like mine.'

'Causing the body to reject the cell?' asked Carol.

'Exactly right.' Holloway answered. 'Before the body can kill that cell though, the virus will have created copies of itself, which will quickly infect the whole host. Within hours, the host starts eating itself from the inside out.'

Carol turned back to the computer screen showing the virus, and shook her head. How anybody could think of creating such a monster was beyond her, but there it was, and it was ready to take over the world.

Chapter 3

James heard pieces of conversation drifting to him, but his mind was on the virus that was inside him, changing him.

His eyes drifted off the magazine and up his forearm, to where a small black dot of dried blood was the only evidence of the illegal injection he'd had. To be infected with the virus was illegal, yes, but nothing would have stopped him from getting that injection.

Right now the virus was recording his genetic code, creating copies of itself and starting to protect his cells. Now and then one of the virions would enter a cell already infected with one of its own kind. This would result in a short but deadly battle, from which only one of the viral organisms would emerge victorious. The virus then ensured that its host cell's DNA matched that of the viral copy, and that the cell itself was built according to the code contained in that DNA. The virus was slowly redefining him, turning back the clock to a time when genetic mutations in his body did not exist.

When the virus had done its job he would be untouched by age or disease. No virus or bacteria would hurt him again, the risk of cancer forming in his body would be zero. Once his genetic code was recorded and fixed by the virus the aging process would stop, his cells would replicate faultlessly every time. For now a couple of the new viral organisms would record DNA that had already mutated, but eventually they would be outnumbered and murdered off by the viral organisms that had the correct DNA pattern.

The risks involved were enormous. The virus took five days to spread through the human body, and for that time he would have symptoms of a viral infection. During that time his body fluids would also be flooded with the viral infection, and any person who caught the virus from him would come to a quick and painful death.

After that time, any person taking a close look at any of his cells would immediately notice the presence of the viral infection, an illegal viral infection. As yet the laws banning the new virus were vague, but government had made it clear that the consequences of contravention of what laws there were would be severe.

Officially the government knew of nobody who had been infected, willingly or unwillingly, with the virus, and if they did they were keeping quiet about it. James was sure the first persons who were discovered to have been infected with the virus would probably die in a laboratory somewhere, their identities and probably their entire existence hidden from the public. In his mind's eye he could see government scientists wringing their hands in anticipation of the first test subjects.

James checked his watch and left the coffee shop. He waited until every car was a safe distance away from him before carefully crossing the road to the hotel where he was taking a five-day holiday. As a rule, he wasn't this careful, but now he knew he had to stay out of any hospital, where his symptoms of viral infection might be recognized as that of the Morphoset virus. Inside the hotel he headed straight up the stairs to his room on the second floor, from where he had a perfect view of the noisy street below.

From the balcony of his room he looked across the road as a blue sedan pulled into the parking area. The woman that got out wore a long-sleeved shirt even in the heat of the midmorning summer sun. She saw him, but kept her eyes averted and headed for the hotel entrance below him. As a precaution they'd had the virus administered at different clinics, and this was the first time in two days he'd seen his wife.

He kept his eyes on the road for a few seconds longer before pulling back. Moments later there was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' he called softly.

Sharon came in and shut the door behind her. 'Hi love,' she said and threw herself into his arms.

He held her close but did not kiss her, it would be too dangerous. Although no claims of testing on humans had been made so far, there was a risk of cross contamination with the virus, a condition that would lead to a very painful death when the

genetic structure of the human body's cells were changed to look like that of another person. The first five days of infection would be dangerous, because not all the cells in his body would be protected yet. Only after that would the virus protect the host, and the cells would be safe.

James held Sharon for a while before letting go to scratch absentmindedly at an itchy place on the back of his hand, where a mosquito had just bitten him. James stopped scratching the mark. Scratching would only make the itchiness worse, if left alone it would heal faster. He started the air conditioner and stepped over to the window to shut it.

'How did it go?'

'Everything went fine,' said Sharon 'I got the injection at nine this morning and I'm feeling a bit sick, but they treated me really well.'

She looked at his worried face. 'Don't stress, everything's going to be fine. You're also sick, we've taken all the precautions and there's nothing to sweat about, except for the heat.' She sat down on the bed and kicked off her shoes.

Even though they could not share a bed for the next five days they'd booked a room for two after deciding it would look strange for a husband and wife to get two different rooms in a hotel, and she'd insisted that they stay in the same hotel. So they had one room with one bed, plus a camper bed hidden in their luggage. They would just have to be careful for the next few nights.

'You look too worried, honey,' said Sharon. 'People will start wondering what's wrong if you keep frowning like that.'

'Yeah, you're right, but for the next few days we'll have to be careful.'

'Careful, but not too careful. How's the mark on your arm doing?'

'It's fine. By tomorrow the worst of it will be gone. As soon as both of our marks are healed we can start leaving the place with a bit more freedom.'

'I agree, but we can't stay holed up here for five days,' said Sharon. 'Even though it's supposed to be our second honeymoon, I think we should at least spend some time where we can be seen. We can put on light summer clothes and sit out by the pool. In this heat and with all the mosquitoes around, nobody will wonder about us not wanting to do much more than sit around.'

Outside the window, the mosquito that had bitten James was pushed gently downwind by the breeze.

Chapter 4

The hot and humid summer air stifled the city. Cynthia lay reading a book, which she put down as she got up to fetch a cold soda. She swatted at a mosquito on her upper arm and closed the window before leaving the room. When it came to a choice between heat and mosquitoes, she would sweat to death before being eaten alive.

Under the small mark the mosquito had made, blood from the insect's previous victim was swept into her own blood. The blood contained a single Morphoset virion. Within moments the Morphoset entered a cell and was checking its own strain of DNA against that of the new host cell. The DNA of the new host cell was wrong, and without waiting the virus set about correcting the host cell's chromosome structure. It would take

a while, but the virus knew what to do. Even before completing the changes to the host DNA the virus had replicated itself within the cell, and sent the new copies of itself out of the cell.

The viral infection had started.

It took some time to change the whole of the DNA structure, but once that was done the host cell changed its form a fraction to reflect the new DNA, and was immediately recognized as being an intruder and attacked by white blood cells. Within moments the cell had been killed, and the single Morphoset virion was once again free. As more Morphoset entered cells and replicated, more Morphoset drifted free in the blood stream, to infect more cells. More cells died, first a couple in the brain, a few in the heart muscle and more in the liver.

Hours later the heat drove Cynthia to open the fridge and take out another can of soda. A light discomfort in the left of her chest reminded her of the cigarettes on her bedside table. She poured the soda into a glass and took it through to her room, leaving the empty tin on the kitchen table. Getting back onto the bed she lit a cigarette and lay back, sipping the soda from the glass on which condensation had already started forming. She picked up the book and continued reading where she'd left off.

By the time she turned the page an uncomfortable feeling in her stomach region made her put the glass of soda down and look at it suspiciously. She continued reading as the changes in her stomach muscle started speeding up. Minutes later she had to sit up as a bout of nausea gripped her. She ran into the bathroom and gripped the basin, retching up the single mouthful of soda she'd swallowed. A bolt of pain shot through her head as the Morphoset virus changed the chromosome structure of more cells in her brain, which was immediately attacked by white blood cells. She staggered back into her room and lay down on the bed, wondering how a bug could so quickly have hit her. The book she'd been reading lay forgotten, the only thing in her world now was pain. For a while she contemplated getting herself to a doctor, but decided against it.

If it was a cold or a stomach bug there was little they could do for her except to alleviate the symptoms, and she had enough medication in the house to take care of that. Cynthia stretched out a hand and opened the drawer next to her bed. From here she pulled a bottle of aspirin and quickly swallowed two of the bitter white tablets, chasing them down with soda. When she was done she lay back, waiting for the pain to go away.

Hours later and with a fever rushing through her, she reached for the phone, pressed the emergency button and held on. The line was answered by a female voice, but by this time Cynthia could barely concentrate enough to hear what the person said. Groaning with pain, she gave her details.

'My name is Cynthia,' rasped her voice. 'I live at 17 Ealy Court, and I need help.'

She stopped and took a few deep breaths, nausea drifting over her once again. She rolled off the bed and dropped to her knees, clutching at her stomach. Letting go of the hand-piece she retched out a thin brown line of blood and stomach juice that dripped through her lips onto the carpet. She picked up the hand-piece and lay down, tucking her knees into her stomach. As if from another planet, she could hear the person on the other side asking her for more details.

'Drank soda,' she started but had to stop to get her breath back.

The voice from another planet asked her age.

'I'm thirty eight,' she managed before a fountain of blood erupted from her nose. Before losing consciousness in a sea of pain she heard the voice on the other side telling her to hold on, that someone was coming to help her and that everything would be alright.

Within minutes paramedics found the woman lying in a mixture of her own blood and vomit. She was barely conscious, a thin red line of blood ran out of her ear and curled around her neck before dripping to the carpet, to join the already congealing pool there. Joey Milano had seen many casualties in his life, but the ones that bled like this were usually violence or high impact car crash victims. This woman had called the center stating she had been drinking soda. From the kitchen came Brand's voice.

'Got the soda tin.'

'I think the rest of it's in a glass here beside the bed, let's get it to the lab and have it analyzed!' called Joey, inserting a drip into the woman's arm. She would be dead in a few minutes at the rate she was bleeding.

Joey looked up at Gloria 'Let's get her to the hospital. She's not looking good and if soda did this there's not much left to do here.'

They lifted Cynthia onto a stretcher and started rolling her out to the waiting ambulance. By the time the ambulance doors had closed Joey knew he was wasting his time. Although he had not seen a Morphoset transmission case before, he and all other paramedics had recently been trained for this eventuality. He picked up the radio and called his base. With a heavy heart he spoke to Andrea, the base operator on shift.

'Andrea, we've got a probable chromo-transfer.'

He noticed the lengthy wait before Andrea's response came. 'I copy you. Have your driver divert to Parasecure. The teams will be waiting for you.'

Joey knew Parasecure, the complex that had been built for this kind of emergency. In recent weeks they had received special training there. After he told the driver where to go everybody in the ambulance fell silent except for the patient, who made choking noises as blood filled her lungs, drowning her.

The woman didn't stand a chance.

The paramedics in the ambulance knew what was waiting for them, three weeks of isolation before they could see their families again. They would be monitored each second of the day in the most secure environment the government had been able to dream up.

They worked on without talking, and by the blue lights that were reflecting on the ambulance windows Joey guessed that an armed escort had joined them. He tried to keep his mind on the patient, wondering where in her body the virus was doing its damage. A virus that had been designed to give life was now destroying that life with a speed he found difficult to come to grips with. Her heart took a couple of skips and turned back to an erratic beat. Joey guessed that the changes in the heart muscle must have intensified, and the white blood cells would be in plentiful supply to make sure nothing foreign tried to enter.

Under his hands her body was eating itself.

With practiced hands the paramedics started covering the woman with a thin plastic bodysuit. Before the doors of the ambulance were opened she would be inside a cocoon, with oxygen tubes and drips going into the plastic suit through specially sealed entry points. There was nothing more they could do, their orders were clear and well defined.

Joey also took a clear plastic suit and starting pulling it on. Once he was zipped up he could hear his own breathing through the air-filtering mouthpiece. He looked at the two other paramedics in the ambulance. It had been his call, but now Brand gave him the thumbs up, he agreed that this was a chromo-transfer. Joey shifted his eyes to Gloria, who shrugged. She was young and lively, and right now she was hoping that Joey had been wrong. Yet she had also attended the training, and he knew that had it been her call, she would have done the same. The symptoms the woman displayed were too obvious to be anything else.

After a few more turns the ambulance stopped. When the doors opened a blinding white light washed the inside of the ambulance, and Joey knew the nightmare had begun.

Chapter 5

Detective Carol Lindique sealed her bodysuit.

‘Ok, make sure nobody leaves the area!’

Her voice was surprisingly strong for the feminine figure. She checked that everything was in place around the building before turning towards the brightly-lit lobby. The clinging plastisuit she wore made walking an effort, while the limited sight the face-mask offered caused her to watch her step continually. Ahead of her a flight of stairs led up, but the apartment she headed for was on the ground floor to the right of the lobby. A microphone and speaker system built into the suit’s mask allowed the wearer to hear and be heard. From behind the plastic mask she greeted the two guards standing outside the door.

Inside the apartment the heat was stifling, all windows and doors having been sealed before her arrival. The front door was shut and sealed behind her as soon as she entered. Six more figures in white plastisuits were going through the house, trying to figure out how the woman had been exposed to the Morphoset virus. Two of them were busy with a specially designed vacuum cleaner, sucking dust from the house. The dust would be taken to the lab, to be analyzed.

In the kitchen she found a collection of sealed containers stacked on the table, about twenty in all, varying in size. They held a collection of insects, some alive and some dead. Sifting through all this was going to be a massive job, and there would be little sleep before it was done. Or after, if the condition of the woman really had been caused by a chromo-transfer, as the paramedics suspected. Already three doctors at Parasure had agreed to the possibility just by looking at the condition of the woman.

Carol stepped into the bedroom where the woman had been found. The carpet there held a variety of stains, some looking like blood, others unidentifiable. The piece of newly stained carpet was being cut out for testing. The men doing the job ignored her, they knew who she was. In the bathroom her assistant was taking the water out of the elbow of the washbasin drain. Absolutely nothing would be overlooked.

Two hours had passed since the paramedics had found the woman in the room. She'd been declared dead on arrival at Parasecure, her body ripped apart from the inside. At least two days, perhaps many more, would be needed before the doctors at Parasecure would be able to give a definite outcome. By now her liver, kidneys and brain would have been removed for testing. The search was on to find any trace of the Morphoset virus in the body, and DNA tests would reveal if anything had tampered with the woman's DNA to cause the cells to be attacked by white blood cells. If this was the case, it would be the first recorded human chromo-transfer case, and would prove that Morphoset was indeed in use by some people.

Carol left the bathroom and went back to the living room. Only the vacuum had been through here, nothing else had been touched. She stepped into the kitchen and stood looking around, trying to think where the virus could have entered. The woman had said she'd been drinking soda. Both the original soda tin and the glass it had been poured into were at the lab for tests.

Her eyes traveled the kitchen, falling at last on the table with its collection of sealed containers. She took a step closer. One of the containers held a mosquito, and next to it three small spiders were trying to get out of their plastic cage. Another container held a fly, its buzzing cut off by the sealed lid. The mosquito was dead. She bent to examine it more closely. It didn't look as if it had been damaged during capture. The legs, wings and body were all still intact.

Carol straightened up and turned around. 'Who caught the mosquito?' she asked.

One of the men placing the cut-out carpet in a bag answered. 'I did, I got it here in the room.'

'Was it alive or dead when you found it?'

'It was dead, but I handled it carefully.'

'Ok, thanks.'

She turned around, thinking about flying insects that could spread disease. She went back to the dead mosquito and picked up the container. Pulling the radio from its clip on her belt she called one of the guards waiting outside and ordered an express drive to Parasecure. One of the guards at the door broke the seal and she went out with the plastic vial in her hand.

A white truck with four revolving red lights was parked at the entrance to the building. On its side the word 'Detox' was stenciled in thick black letters. She went directly to the truck and got in the back. Giving the vial to a guard inside the truck, she went into the first of three cubicles and stripped off the plastisuit. This she deposited into a specially marked biohazard container. The cubicle had a door leading to another cubicle, in which a custom shower had been installed. The water that washed her smelled strongly of household bleach. She let the warm water spray over her until she was sure that anything she might have carried out of the house with her was washed off, then closed the taps and got a towel from a drawer placed in the side wall. In the third cubicle she found a fresh set of her clothes, kept there for times like these. She dressed with as much haste as she could, but still made sure she was neat before she collected the vial containing the mosquito.

Carol got into the back of the police vehicle, where two policemen were waiting for her. The moment the rear doors slammed shut the driver started speeding through the streets towards Parasecure. With some sense of smugness she noticed that instead of

sitting as near to her as possible as men most often did, these two officers were just about climbing out of the window to avoid coming into contact with her.

The four policemen in the vehicle kept an icy silence as they drove towards the lab. Two more police vehicles with sirens wailing joined them, blocking the road ahead to traffic. When they reached the lab both men beside her got out with more hurry than suited their bulky forms. She got out and they followed her to the front door of the building, where two heavily armed guards took over from them. Once inside the building she relaxed.

‘Good evening detective,’ said one of the guards as they headed down the corridor. ‘Everybody is ready if you need them, and everything’s been taken care of. If you need anything, let us know.’

‘Thanks Charlie, I will. What you can do for me is find out if the lab results for the woman who came in earlier are out yet. If they are, I would like to see them as soon as possible.’

‘Will do,’ answered Charlie.

They walked past a set of doors behind which steps led into an underground area, where the first subterranean levels of the complex were being built. For now the lab was on the first floor, and she took the flight of stairs ahead of the guards. Before going into the laboratory she once again entered a special dressing room, pulling on a plastic suit with a face cover. She dismissed the guards and entered the double sealing doors.

Inside the laboratory the stark white beauty of the place struck her as it always did. Every surface glittered and gleamed under the fluorescent lighting. Soft sound drifted from the ceiling as air-purifiers pumped clean air into the room. The laboratory was divided into glass compartments to minimize the risk of cross contamination of specimens.

The man Carol was looking for was at a desk in a glass partition. Doctor Holloway was behind his computer, looking at 3D models of the Morphoset virus interacting in a virtual world with different human chromosomes, the computer recording the results from these virtual tests, to be later weighed against actual tests. She went over to the partition and rapped on the glass door before letting herself in.

‘Good evening, Dr Holloway, I’m glad to find you here.’

Doctor Holloway turned around. Behind his own mask a smile spread on his face. ‘And a very good evening to you too, Carol. I hear you’ve got a little something for me?’

‘You’re always one ahead of me, Doctor,’ she held up the vial containing the dead mosquito. ‘We found this in the house, and I want you to test it for Morphoset.’

‘Why test this one specifically? What’s brooding in that detective mind of yours?’

‘Call it a hunch. A mosquito is as common as anything in these parts, but we’ve got no idea where the woman got the virus from. I’m thinking the mosquito might have done the trick. You told me the virus doesn’t spread through air, but a mosquito could have carried it, couldn’t it?’

Dr Holloway smiled at her ‘Ok, I see what you mean. Let’s go over to a clean bench.’

He led her out of the glass office and into another partition. Inside the partition a complete laboratory had been set up with everything in place for work to commence immediately.

Doctor Holloway took the vial to a scanner set in the wall. At the touch of a button a door slid open, revealing one of the world's smallest CAT scanners ever made. He placed the vial on its side in the device, fastened it with down with fitted straps and pressed a button to close it.

'Let's see what the computer comes up with,' said Holloway, keying his instructions to the computer.

On the computer screen lists of biological names for mosquitoes started appearing, every one accompanied by a picture of the animal represented. Three stories above them a powerful computer started tying the mosquito in the scanner to the pictures on the computer console.

'Let's leave this baby to get on with it, while we go raid the coffee machine,' said Holloway, turning to the door.

'Sorry doc, but I have to speak to the paramedic who found the woman. I'm afraid I'll have to take a rain check on the coffee,' Carol smiled at him 'I would appreciate it though if you could give me a call as soon as the tests on the mosquito are done.'

'Ok, but be warned it will take a few hours,' answered the doctor. 'The mosquito is very small, but when the machines are finished we'll have every molecule of it down on paper. I'll let you know.'

Chapter 6

Ishmael Jacobson walked away from the customs official to where the turnstile was starting to spew out baggage. A mass of people pressed forward to their luggage, hasty to get away and get on with life. His bags came past twice before he was near enough to reach out and pick them up.

Outside international arrivals he saw a towering black man holding a board with his name printed on it in thick black letters. Ishmael approached him.

'Mister Jacobson?' asked the man in a deep African accent.

'That's right.'

'I'm John, your driver sir. Let me get those for you.'

Huge hands reached for the trolley and pushed it towards a clearing away from the crowd. 'Is there anything you need before we head for the clinic?' asked John as they neared the doors of the building.

'That depends on whether my instructions have been taken care of, John.'

'Everything's in place, sir.'

'In that case I think we can be on our way.'

Half an hour later they were on a freeway, heading out of the city. As they headed east both the houses and the traffic grew thinner until they were in rolling farmlands, with little traffic. In the back of the four-wheel drive cruiser Ishmael found a small fridge holding a selection of local beers, a telephone, and a small television.

He stared out at what was now his new home, fields of maize and cattle passing on both sides. Two hours later they turned off the freeway and followed a narrow road for some time before heading up an incline on what was more pothole than road. Ditches formed by rain cut the tar, and Ishmael began to understand the need of the four-wheel drive vehicle. He also started wondering how wise his choice had been to find work in a laboratory in the African bush. According to his new employer he would have every

luxury and the best laboratory in the country. It had sounded good at the time, but the state of the road worried him. The thought crossed his mind that a lab might not have to be very good to be the best in this country. Another few minutes and the road became dirt only. John carefully took the van through the overhanging branches and moments later they stopped at a gate guarded by security personnel. An elegantly carved wooden sign on the wall read 'Water's Rest'. The guard greeted John in his native language and barely gave Ismael any attention before opening the gate.

That must mean I'm in good company, thought Ishmael and craned his neck to look out of the front window. Once they were past the gate the dirt road turned very steep uphill. Ishmael had never been on such rough terrain before, but John seemed to know what he was doing.

'Do you drive this road often?' asked Ishmael, trying to keep the worry out of his voice.

'About two or three times a day, depending on the need. Only time it gets real difficult is in the summer, when the rain makes going a bit difficult. But don't worry about that, if things get bad we rent a chopper, because these roads disappear under water from time to time. Mostly, I'll pick up tourists and bring them along, so you don't need to worry, the road is safe and I've had lots of experience.'

On both sides of the road dense bush formed a solid green wall. John turned the cooler to full blast as the midday heat began to work its way into the van.

The road wound to the top of a hill and then fell away into an emerald green valley, at the bottom of which a river looped its lazy way through the trees. According to Dr Vochnerr the lodge was on the river's banks. Mainly a relaxation clinic and game lodge, it also boasted a laboratory specializing in nature conservation, while behind this one a new laboratory awaited his arrival. It was here that Ishmael would cultivate the Morphoset virus, and the tourists that came to the lodge would pay good money for the services of this lab.

There was another project Ishmael wanted to work on. Morphoset had a drawback, and until this was sorted out many people would remain skeptical about its use. As the van descended into the valley, Ishmael once again thought about his most difficult challenge yet. The human brain did not replicate its cells, when a brain cell died it was over and done with, there would be no new one to take its place. Its function was taken over by another part of the brain. Eventually though, too much of the brain would die for it to be of any use. Morphoset worked by making sure that replicated cells were perfect, but if cells did not replicate it was of no use.

The challenge now facing Ishmael was to come up with a method to make the brain reproduce healthy cells. The dead cells would first have to be removed from the brain, and then another cell would have to replicate to take its place. Ishmael smiled at the thought of facing the challenge.

At the bottom of the valley they came to another large gate, this one also heavily guarded. Once again the guards and John exchanged only a brief greeting before they opened the gate to let them van through. Inside the gates the word luxury took on a whole new meaning. The bush thinned out to become rolling green lawns with massive trees growing everywhere. The dirt road was replaced by a neatly paved driveway flanked by gardens filled with every color of flower. A three-leveled thatched roof mansion stood between them and the river. John drove up to the building and parked at the front door.

Doctor Vochnerr stepped out of the shade. 'Good afternoon Ishmael, how are you?' he asked as Ishmael got out of the vehicle.

'Good to see you Dr Vochnerr. I am well, and I trust I find you in good health?'

'I wouldn't have it any other way, my dear Ishmael. How was your trip?'

'Exhausting, as the trips usually are. I'll be glad when I get my feet up tonight.'

'Let's get inside for a start, and don't worry about your luggage, it will be taken care of.'

Dr Vochnerr led the way into the luxury mansion.

Chapter 7

The first twelve hours he spent in Parasecure's isolation unit were the longest Joey could remember. He was confined to a hospital bed, with monitors attached to him through lines and tubes keeping a close watch on his physical condition. A nurse stayed by his bed during that time, watching for any sign that something might be wrong. The air he expelled together with his bodily waste was tested for any sign of the virus. A light sedative was feeding into his arm through a drip as for twelve hours he lay thinking of the woman Cynthia. Time and again he thought about how he had found her, his diagnoses and the woman's eventual death. The last he had seen of her was as he helped take her out of the ambulance. Her eyes had started oozing blood through closed lids, and Joey had been grateful for her unconsciousness.

Now Joey was in a glass booth with a microphone and speaker set in the table in front of him. Detective Carol Lindique wanted to speak to him in connection with the case. She entered the opposite side of the glass partition and sat down.

'Can you hear me Joey?' asked detective Lindique.

'I hear you loud and clear, detective. What can I help you with?'

'I need you to tell me everything that happened when you found the patient. Your diagnosis was correct, and we need to get every bit of info we can.'

Once again Joey relived the nightmare, recalling everything that happened from the time he got the call to when he arrived at Parasecure. When he had finished, the detective left him to get some sleep.

Even then sleep refused to come. His breathing in the plastisuit's mask kept him awake as phantasmagoric visions of the woman bleeding to death crept into his mind. At last, when he could take it no more, he called the nurse and asked for a sleeping pill. Only after taking the small green pill did he fall into a deep sleep, his last thought echoing as he went down.

Out there, people were turning themselves into gods.

When Joey awoke a couple of hours later the drip with the sedative had been removed from his arm, and he felt much better.

The sound on the room's television was turned down, but he lay looking at a news broadcast. The picture showed a reporter in front of what looked like a university campus, while behind her three bodies were being carted out to a waiting police vehicle. The thought of another mindless campus killing entered his head, and he tried to imagine what could have brought this one on.

It was only when a policeman pushing a trolley of laboratory equipment sealed in plastic bags was shown that Joey realized something completely different must have happened. He grabbed the remote control from the bedside table, but by the time he turned the volume up a neatly dressed man was delivering the weather forecast.

Joey lay back in his bed, trying to push the thought of what three deaths and a trolley full of laboratory equipment might have to do with each other out of his head. He started switching channels, looking for another news broadcast that might have the story, and two channels later he was rewarded. This time a pretty blond reporter was telling viewers how the police had already found evidence indicating that a professor and two of his students had tried to replicate the creation of the Morphoset virus. When the reporter finished Joey turned the volume back down.

He reached for the intercom button on the headrest behind him, determined to get to the bottom of the story. If those three had tried to make Morphoset, then hundreds of other people might be doing the same, and the thought of even a couple of them succeeding was unthinkable.

‘Hi Joey, what can I do for you?’ came a voice over the intercom. He could see the woman on the other side of the glass panel, smiling in at him. He spoke loud to make sure he was heard through his plastisuit ‘Nurse, a detective Lindique came to see me earlier. Is there any chance I would be able to speak to her again?’

‘I’ll see what I can do right after I’ve given you something to eat. Detective Lindique will probably still be in the building, she practically lives here. By the way, you don’t have to talk so loud, there is a microphone built into your suit, so you can relax.’

‘Ok thanks, and something to eat would be great, I’m starving. What’s on the menu?’

‘You’ve got a choice between salmon and steak, but I’d suggest the steak.’

‘Steak it will be then.’

The nurse turned her back on him and disappeared from view, and moments later Gloria came in and sat down on the edge of the bed. Even though he knew she was looking at him, he couldn’t see her eyes behind the plastic mask.

‘Hallo Joey, welcome back to the world of the living. You were out for so long we were getting worried about you. How are you feeling?’

Joey looked at her through the slightly warped plastic mask.

‘Fine thanks, although I suppose things could be a lot better. I hope you and Brand are doing OK. The last shift we did was a long one, so hopefully you two also got some good rest.’

‘We did just that, and it seems there’s plenty more where that came from. We’ve got another twenty hours in these suits before we get our clothes back. But there’s good news too. Because of the shortage of paramedics and the long hours, they’re already thinking about discharging us sooner, and I for one will be glad to be out of this place.’

‘Yeah, me too,’ he looked into her mask, trying to see her eyes. ‘What are your thoughts about this whole business? I mean, I was right about the woman being a chromo transfer case, and I feel good for making the right decision and making sure we were safe. But what about the fact that she had the virus inside her?’ Joey kept quiet about the television news story, wanting to get her reaction to the immediate situation first.

‘It’s bad alright,’ said Gloria. ‘The doctors are still waiting for the lab test to see if the virus was an accurate version of Morphoset, or just some concoction made by

somebody in a lab, but you saw the condition of the woman. If it's not an exact copy of the virus the woman died for nothing, and probably someone else died too. But if it is an accurate copy, then it means that there's at least one person out there who is going to live for a long time.'

Joey again tried to see her eyes through the mask. She had just spoken a reflection of what had been going through his mind.

'If it's really Morphoset, the real thing, it also means someone out there has got a viable strain of the virus, and it could easily be spread,' said Gloria.

'I see there are some varsity kids that didn't do too well in their finals,' he ventured.

'So you saw it too. I wish I hadn't. The thought of going back on duty and finding more cases like Cynthia scares the hell out of me. The cops and army guys are going through every lab in the country, trying to determine if anybody has been growing the virus, but so far little evidence has been found. And they still haven't found out who the originator of the computer virus was. The only thing they think they know for sure is that the virus was first spread from somewhere within the country.'

The nurse came back into view behind the glass panel and placed the tray with Joey's food in a special compartment. When the green light on their side went on Gloria fetched the food and put it on the table beside Joey. 'Wait until I'm outside and the door is sealed, otherwise the alarm sounds when you take the mask off. I'm going to have a chat with Brand, and we'll keep a close eye on the television, maybe we can find out more.'

'I've told the nurse I'd like to talk with the detective that came to see me earlier. If I get to see her I'll check if she can help me with some facts. Not that I think the detective part is any of our work, but I'd like to know what's going on.'

After Gloria left the room and the green light above the door came on, Joey had the first chance to remove the mask and breathe freely. Still thinking about the virus, he dived into his steak.

Chapter 8

James turned from the window to look at his sleeping wife. He'd had a terrible night and had gotten up two hours ago to sit and think things through. Although he was a millionaire there was more and more reason for him to be careful about touching too much of his money. He had quit his job when his investment accounts had been strong enough to look after him and his wife, and he and Sharon had planned on retiring early. This was already a risk, for retiring at the age of thirty with so much money in the bank was a sure way of drawing attention, especially the attention of the tax man. Over the years he had carefully put most of his money in an offshore bank account, and when the time came to retire there was only a few million dollars in his savings account. This did not look like much, but if investigations were made, he was sure to pick up trouble.

When he left the company he'd worked for he'd promised himself he would go straight for the rest of his life. It would be ridiculous to take chances when he already had everything he needed. He had tied up his matters carefully, getting an accountant to make sure everything looked good. Then, at a party to celebrate his freedom, a friend brought along a doctor who specialized in viruses, and when the party was over the friend and the

doctor stayed behind. The doctor wanted to speak to James about a project he was working on. He knew nothing of how James had made his money and neither did the friend, but they knew he had money and the doctor thought he was on to something big.

Sharon had taken the friend into a lounge where they chatted while James and Dr Jacobson went into the study to discuss the matter. Once in the study, the doctor quickly turned to business.

‘James, I’m with a scientific company that specializes in the medical field,’ Dr Jacobson had said. ‘About two years ago, I met a lady whom I will not name tonight. She is a top class specialist with all sorts of wonderful degrees written behind her name. One night she told me why mankind grows old, and I was intrigued. One of the main reasons, although not the only reason, is that we have something called DNA, and as we grow older, the DNA strings mutate, causing our cells to not recreate correctly. The first signs we see of this is the small lines on our faces, around the eyes and the mouth.’

Dr Jacobson stopped here to let this sink in.

‘I’ve heard about this,’ James could remember himself replying. ‘Apparently the DNA strings are very long and there are a couple of huge computers trying to work out the whole thing.’

The doctor had smiled. ‘The DNA code was cracked a few years ago,’ he told James. ‘We now have the human genome marked up to add to, change or take away from as we please. We don’t yet know what all the parts do, but when we do we might well be able to alter it in such a way that humans could be born without tonsils, or they may no longer grow wisdom teeth that have to be taken out.’

James remembered how skeptical he’d felt at this point. He had seen films and had read newspaper reports of what happened when people played around with genetics. Yet he was fascinated by what he thought the doctor was leading up to. How wrong he had been.

‘You want me to help you financially so you can put up a laboratory that will test changes made to DNA?’

At this the doctor had looked mildly amused. ‘No James. Financial help yes, but not to test changes made to the DNA strings. I work mostly with viruses, and what I have to say now is strictly confidential. I have come up with a virus that will make copies of a person’s DNA, and will from then on ensure that the person’s DNA does not mutate. If this could be done, mankind would take much longer to age, and we might grow several hundred or even thousands of years old.’

James was struck dumb. Of all the science fiction stories he had heard this was the most incredible. Eternal life, and by the sound of it, eternal youth too.

‘Wait a minute, Doctor,’ he said. ‘You come in here and tell me that this is confidential. You met me tonight at this party, and you trust me to tell no one that you have the answer to eternal life?’

‘Let me explain, James,’ replied the doctor. ‘I know full well that you have a lot of money in the bank, somewhere. A person does not retire at the age of thirty if he is not very sure he’s going to make it to the end with enough cash to spare. This is why I chose you to confide in. You have the resources that I need to go the last mile on my project, and in return for this I will give you something that your money cannot buy. I will give you eternal life.’

James sat staring in silence at the doctor for some time. The doctor had met his gaze steadily, looking very assured of himself. Surely, James thought, under the calm exterior there was either a madman or a genius, or, more likely, a blend of both. At the time he had not yet known how dangerous the whole operation would be, and he found it slightly amusing that the doctor had picked him instead of somebody else.

‘Ok, how much do you need? I’m not saying I’ll help you, and you’re not getting an answer out of me tonight, but let’s get the facts on the table and I’ll think about it.’

‘A few months’ worth of floating capital is all I need to finish my work. Most of the work is done, but I’m afraid my funds have dried up. I dare not let the company I work for know what I am up to, so I cannot turn to them for help. The virus is basically complete and all that is left to do now is the testing. That is where the problem lies.’

Three days later James had agreed to the deal, on condition that he stayed anonymous no matter what, and that, should the project be a success, he would get the virus free for himself and his wife. If any money was made out of the project, he would get his investment back, with a large amount of interest.

Now he was in a hotel room and suffering from insomnia because he was worried. Knowledge of the virus had become public, and political battles ensued that had at times turned into chaos as human rights groups and activists had battled it out in the streets of the world’s larger cities.

James had gotten his share of the virus sometime after the world conference had banned it. Today was their third day in the hotel, and after only two more days they would be safe again. But how safe would they be, he asked himself as he shifted his gaze around the room. They could live for about ten years at the most before questions would be asked about their age.

No, they would have to stay on the move and it would be necessary to change identities ever so often. Right now he did not know how he was going to do that, but it was the only way of not being found out. Even though the virus was now public domain due to the computer virus, he would have to be careful. The government had set up a special task force and a laboratory called Parasecure, and if they could prove he was guilty his stay there would be brief and terminal, he was sure of that.

As the first birds began to greet the dawn outside he knew he would have to change his plans. They would stay in the hotel for the next two days, until they were feeling better again, but then they would have to move on. He would have to work out a plan to get new identities, and get them not just soon, but often too.

Chapter 9

Carol held the vial to the light and stared at the clear liquid inside. Somewhere in the liquid drifted a minute but deadly quantity of Morphoset. This was the Morphoset that had killed the mosquito, and was probably from the same batch that had killed the woman. Carol shuddered when she thought about what the autopsy had revealed.

‘Do you think your team will find the other part of the riddle inside the woman?’ she asked

Doctor Holloway shook his head. ‘We don’t know yet. The mosquito was small, but the woman is altogether a different kettle of fish. It’s much worse than looking for a

needle in a haystack, it's more like looking for a needle in the whole field of haystacks. We do know she had a chromo-transfer, but only because of your sharp thinking when you saw the mosquito the first time. The very thought of a mosquito carrying the virus never even crossed anybody's mind until now.

They started walking towards the lab doors. 'By the way, did you go over the woman for needle marks?' asked Carol.

'We did, and found absolutely nothing. There are a few old scars in the bend of her arm, but they healed ages ago. I think you can safely say the mosquito transferred the virus and it was not injected into her.'

They got to the doors and went through, separating to get rid of the plastic suits in specially provided cubicles. When Carol saw the doctor again a few minutes later they continued down white corridors towards the cafeteria, with Carol taking up the conversation again.

'The fact that we have six deaths in a total of four cases worries me, especially since they all happened within two weeks. I keep asking myself how long it's going to be before people start dropping off in masses, while others start living very long lives. It could be that for every one person that dies, ten thousand are alive and are going to be so for a long time. That is why it's so important that we get on the new cases as soon as possible. The three students that died after taking something they concocted in the school lab can wait for later. We know how they died, I don't see any reason to investigate the matter any further, except maybe for legal proceedings.'

Dr Holloway agreed. 'I'll delegate those three to somebody else. In the meantime we'll keep a close eye on how many people get killed trying to recreate the virus. That will give us a good picture of how big the problem we are facing really is. It would be nice if you could get a real breakthrough and catch somebody culturing the virus from the original batch.'

'Yes, it would. A case like that would give us good insight into how well the virus is selling and how wide the original virus has spread by now. The problem lies in the simplicity of the virus. I'm not saying it was easy to create or that it works in a simple way, I'm saying that it's much too easy to grow if you have a nice sample.'

They reached the cafeteria and headed straight for the coffee table to get coffee, then found a quiet table to sit down at. After adding sugar to her coffee Carol continued. 'As I mentioned, six deaths such a short time after knowledge of the virus was released is a worry. The countries we have a no-virus agreement with will need to know about this, and if they have any of their own cases we'll need to know about those too.'

Holloway nodded. 'By the way, there has been some interesting experimenting going on with the virus. As you know, the virus has only been banned for human and commercial use. Government agencies like ourselves are still allowed to work with the virus, to hopefully come up with derivatives that could be used for medical purposes, but without the age effect. Care to hear about this?'

'Lay it on me, what have you guys been up to?'

'We've been testing the virus on animals to see what effect it has on areas of damaged tissue. The idea is to find cures for human conditions of the same nature, for instance on people who have bad burn wounds. There are already a couple of scientists who claim that the virus does just this. The whole thing is still very experimental, but for now we're calling the phenomenon Retro-Chromosis, meaning that the virus can actually

repair the affected area by correcting the DNA structure of damaged cells. If we can prove this, and I must say I personally think we will, it will be wonderful.'

Carol was stunned. 'You're making Morphoset sound like a one-size-fits-all cure. If the virus can actually do what you hope it can, it would save the world billions of dollars in no time at all.'

'You're right, but we're still stuck on the aging problem. If we can get past that, it really would be a great help,' Holloway stood up 'Thanks for the chat, Carol. I have to get back to my work. If anything else comes up let me know, will you?'

'Sure thing doctor,' she said as he left the table.

Chapter 10

James closed his eyes and sank back in his living room couch with a sigh. He had just instructed an estate agent to sell his million-dollar home. The decision to sell had been a painful one, but necessary under the circumstances. A few days ago he had made a phone call to the clinic where he had been illegally injected, after which the doctor had called him back on a secure line and told him who to contact to get new identities for both him and his wife.

They had returned from their holiday four weeks ago, and he had been looking forward to a few days of lounging around the pool, but the worries started almost immediately. Every night the television was dominated by news bulletins and talk shows about the effect the new virus would have, and government was pushing for legislation that would allow them to keep a close watch on the entire country's bank accounts. At least that was one worry he did not have. His deed was done and his five days of being sick was over. He got up and went over to the drinks cabinet, where he poured himself a whiskey. Taking his drink back to the couch he picked up the phone again and called the second number on the list he had made the night before. After a few rings a woman's voice answered the phone and told him he'd reached Roxie's Travel, introducing herself as Pam.

'Hallo Pam, this is James Walker,' he said 'I'd like to book a holiday for two to a game park in Africa, and according to an advert of yours you specialize in that kind of thing.'

'We do indeed, Mister Walker,' the voice replied. 'For how long do you plan on going?'

'Let's say four weeks,' he said and waited for her reply.

She hesitated only a moment or two before answering. 'Do you have any particular park in mind?'

'The brochure mentioned quite a couple of private game lodges, and the one called 'The Kraal' has gotten my attention. Do you think you could book me in there?' It was where the doctor had instructed him to go. The doctor had also told him where to get the brochure which now lay next to him, but the travel agency's sales rep didn't need to know about that.

'I can get you two weeks at the lodge, from the fourth to the eighteenth next month, Mister Walker. Would that be fine with you?'

By the time he hung up the whole trip had been booked, and James felt better now that things were taking a definite route.

Somewhere in the house he could hear Sharon supervising the packing of those items which they wanted to keep. He wondered how she was taking the whole business. All of a sudden, what had seemed like a simple case of catching a virus and living long lives had turned into a nightmare of running from the law, getting new identities and, he had yet to tell her, going out of the country for months at a time just so people might forget their faces. Yet as long as she stayed with him she would never have to work. If his money ran out he could get more, and how he made it would not matter since they were running from the law in any way. She just had to view the moving around as an extended holiday. Of course she would get tired of this, but they would probably live in one spot for years at a time before going off again.

With a silent sigh he dialed the third number.

Days later, a neighbour's son who had agreed to help for the day carefully packed the bubble-wrapped china dinner set into a box in the dining room. His instructions had been clear about one thing, it wasn't how much work he got done during the day, but how careful he was. Sharon was supervising the three boys and two girls who had come to help for the day. She would have liked to do all the packing herself, but had only recently realized how much she had gathered during the five years she and James had been together. She walked into the kitchen where the two girls were packing all but the most important kitchen utensils. These would be sold to the first second hand store that would take them. Unlike the china set and antiques in the house these did not have much value and she needed to get rid of them in a hurry. The other stuff would be packed and stored. She sat down by the table and looked at the two talkative girls chat away at teenage things.

It wasn't what they were discussing that held her interest, but the way in which they were discussing it. No cares showed on their faces, they talked as if she herself was just another piece of furniture, to be packed away or sold later. In her mind's eye she imagined what her own children might be like when they grew to this age.

She saw them lazing about the pool, catching sun and listening to the radio while she and her husband entertained friends. That she was packing up and that the house would shortly be sold did not even enter her thoughts, she still imagined the children in *this* house by *this* pool. There was only the problem of James being basically sterile.

After trying for years to fall pregnant she'd insisted they both go to a doctor to find the cause of their failure. It turned out to be a problem on James's side, his sperm count was so low that she would probably never fall pregnant. If they wanted children, the doctors would have to use modern technology to help them. They had thought about this, but in the end decided to wait a few years before going to such extremes. In the meantime they would enjoy the freedom his disability provided. It was only after taking Morphoset that they had been careful for a few days and this because of fear of a chromo-transfer which the doctor had warned them about, not because she was scared of falling pregnant. Now she had more than enough time to get pregnant and have babies, even if it did mean going to a doctor. In a few years' time there was bound to be a couple of kids playing around the place.

‘Anybody for some juice?’ she asked, trying to get her thoughts back to the present.

‘That would be super, thanks,’ answered one of the girls, while the other nodded and smiled at her. She went to the fridge and took out a bottle of juice, then went over to the sink and started pouring juice into glasses. She asked one of the girls to hand the glasses around and took one for herself. She left the kitchen and stepped into the front garden, taking a sip of the sweet nectar.

The mouthful of juice entered her empty stomach and left it again moments later. After a short journey through her bloodstream a few vitamins from the juice did not feed her body, but instead fed a very small body inside hers. It had been there for only a few days, and was as yet only a collection of cells, perfectly dividing.

They had been formed when a female egg and a male sperm cell had merged. Within the new cell two viruses had come into contact with each other, but in the presence of certain hormones had not attacked each other. Instead they had also merged, and had immediately formed a host DNA string resembling the DNA of the new cell.

As the group of cells divided the virus made copies of itself, one for each new cell. In nine months’ time the cells would have split into billions of cells, would have a form and be born into the world. Without the baby knowing it, he would be the world’s first real miracle in many years.

Chapter 11

One month after his arrival on a continent considered by the rest of the world to be untamed wild lands, Ishmael Jacobson was feasting in the glory of his new laboratory. It was every bit as good as he had been promised, and in many ways even better. He could not even imagine how his employer had built a laboratory this advanced in the heart of the African bush. The lab was split into two sections, one part for production of Morphoset and the other for research.

Growing the virus was dangerous, but Ishmael had been working in his field long enough to handle the risks. The virus needed only to be put in culture to let it grow, after which he took small amounts from each dish and prepared it for injection into humans. Once he’d grown enough of the virus to fill a tray full of culture dishes all he had to do was add more medium for the virus to grow on, and the virus did the rest, leaving him free to pursue his new target.

Ishmael was not concerned with marketing and selling the virus. That was left to doctor Vochnerr, who ran the lodge and saw to it that special guests arrived regularly. Those guests were given a thorough medical examination on their arrival and were then watched for a day or two, depending on their health and age. If no sign of any disease could be seen they received a dose of Morphoset on the third day of their stay, after which they were monitored for a couple of hours. For the next five days they were kept isolated in rooms that were sealed off from the rest of the world. During this time huge amounts of the virus was generated inside their bodies, and the risk of cross contamination was big.

According to the stress relief clinic’s official documents, the five day’s isolation was known as ‘Psychological detoxification’ or ‘Cleansing the Patient’, with the theory

being that non-contact for five days would get rid of any bad psychological effects the patient might be suffering from. After five days the patient once again rejoined the guests and spent a wonderful holiday in the lap of luxury. To keep the cover neat and tidy doctor Vochnerr had medical records of each patient, a before and after analysis and a treatment success rate of just under ninety-five percent.

Not even the nurses who worked with the patients knew the facts of what was going on at the clinic. According to them the lodge was at once a full luxury getaway from the rat race and a medical institution catering for those suffering from depression. For how long the plan would work Ishmael had no idea. He stayed for free with all the luxuries of the lodge at his disposal, and his salary went into a carefully hidden bank account. If trouble struck he would be out of the country and on his way to Italy within hours, from where he could plan the rest of his life, if the need ever arose.

For now he was content to look through the eye of a microscope and see the wonderful world of the micro-biotic. Under the microscope lens a cell split into two perfect clones of the original. He pressed the button on his stopwatch and held his breath. This was the third time he had managed to split the brain cell of a rabbit, and every second the clones were alive was a look into the world of god-hood. The first time he had tried the experiment, the cell had split and both child cells had immediately died. On the next try they lived for fifteen seconds before both cells simultaneously expired.

This time one of the cells lasted a mere ten seconds before collapsing, while the other kept going to the twenty second mark before it too started disintegrating. Ishmael muttered under his breath as he drew his eyes away from the microscope and pulled his notepad nearer. He scribbled a couple of notes and then removed the specimen glass from the microscope and dropped it in an acid bath.

He left the laboratory and strolled through the humid late afternoon heat towards the veranda of the luxury lodge. The new drug he was working on was complex. If he gave the cell just enough of certain chemicals, the cell would split. Now he had to find the correct mixture to make sure the cell would live. Once that was done, testing could begin on live animals, probably rabbits or mice, before going on to primates and ultimately doing tests on humans.

On the veranda he found himself a seat in the shade. On the banks of the river a couple of crocodiles were starting to move into the water as the sun left the sandbanks. Behind Ishmael a family of tourists were watching the scene and commenting loudly. He wondered if they were regular guests or special high paying ones, those who paid his salary. A waiter dressed in a neat suit arrived and placed a glass of fruit juice and a bowl of mixed nuts and raisins on the table.

‘Good afternoon, sir,’ said the waiter in the deep accent of the African people. ‘Is there anything else I can get you?’

‘That’s all right, thanks,’ replied Ishmael. The waiter left again as silently as he had appeared. From his first day there, Ishmael had been treated like royalty. The waiters had immediately memorized what he liked for breakfast through to the last cup of coffee he drank before retiring in the evening. What he would actually have liked in the heat was an ice cold beer, but until the problem of splitting the brain cell was solved he would stay away from anything that might possibly harm his body.

Lightning followed by distant thunder flashed in the sky to the east, heralding the coming of a storm. The storms always came from the east, from the hot Indian Ocean. He

had only been here a short while and already he was getting used to the hot and humid weather, enjoying the afternoon storms and early morning wake-up calls he got from the birds. He'd been accommodated in one of the standard luxury rooms overlooking the river, and Hendrik, the farm's game ranger, had taken a couple of hours explaining the dangers of the area to him, from which spiders to be careful of to a strict warning about the speed of a crocodile.

In the afternoon heat Ishmael drank the cool fruit juice. It was time to relax, and enjoy the infinite life he had created for himself.

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