

DAVID IN THE LION'S DEN

Geoffrey A. Landis

Monday 25 March, U.S.A.

David had both of his arms up in a glove box when Jake walked into the lab. He was concentrating on pipetting one drop of a cultured retrovirus into each of the sixteen tissue culture samples that his grad student Asim had carefully prepared and didn't notice Jake was there until he spoke.

"Have you heard the news yet?" asked Jake. His voice was grim.

"News?" David Kantrowicz sighed. "There's news? No, haven't heard it." He put down the sample, capped it off, and withdrew his arms from the glove box carefully.

He was a tall man, with dark curly hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Only a close friend or exceptionally keen observer would notice the slight hesitation in his step from where he'd stopped a small-caliber bullet long ago. "From your tone, though, I can guess that it's not good. They made the decision? It's Saud the younger?"

"It's him."

"Damn." After months of bitter infighting after the death of the king, the council of princes of Saudi Arabia had finally reached agreement. Aboud ibn Abd al-Saud would be king of Saudi Arabia, protector of Mecca and nominal leader of the Moslems. It had come at the worst possible time, when the Arab world was increasingly becoming disenchanted with the lack of any signs of resolution to the peace process. Al-Saud was a fanatic; he had made his pledge that he would not accept compromise with Israel of any sort, no matter how well crafted, or what the cost. And the cost was sure to be high. No matter who won. "As my grandfather would put it: *oy, vey, such tsuris* we need like we need holes in the head."

"Yeah?" Jake said. "Did your grandfather really talk like Woody Allen imitating a Poconos comedian?"

David shrugged. "How should I know? He died when I was a kid. To hear my father speak, he did. So anyway, we're ready?"

"We've talked about it enough. The question is, are *you* ready?" Jake asked.

"I guess so." David sighed again. He turned back to his glove box to start

putting away his samples. “Although I’d rather not. War is for young fellows, not superannuated postdocs like me. But, last week I called Yosef in Tel Aviv. He said that they were pretty sure it would be Saud, and when it hits the fan he’d welcome having me back with him. I told him that if it comes down to it, I’ll be there.”

“You don’t count as old until you get tenure, kid. I got the tickets. You fly out tonight at seven, arrive in Rome late morning, and get into Tel Aviv about two.”

“So soon? I’d hoped for more time to prepare.”

“Things are moving faster than we’d expected.”

“So be it. How about your part? Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Jake reached into his pocket and look out a finger-sized test tube, the end sealed with a wax plug. A small amount of dirty water was pooled in the bottom. He handed it to David. “We finished last night.”

Dave looked at it skeptically. “Doesn’t look like much, does it? This is enough?”

“Don’t doubt. It’s plenty.”

He looked at it critically. “You know ... that’s some real work here. It’s a pity we can’t get something publishable out of this ... maybe *Nature* ...”

“Don’t even think about it.”

“I know.” He paused. “I’d better be off, I guess.”

“One more thing.” Jake walked to one of the stainless-steel lab refrigerators and retrieved a sandwich in a Zip-loc bag from behind the rows of sample jars and tissue cultures. The refrigerator was labeled with a large red letters: LABORATORY USE ONLY. DON’T KEEP YOUR LUNCH HERE. “Here you go. Ham and swiss with bean sprouts. For your trip. *Shalom*, my friend. And *mazel tov*?

“Yeah, right.” David looked back at his glove box. He thought about leaving a note for his grad student to clean it up and keep the cultures alive, but realized it wouldn’t do any good. The virus he’d been working with wasn’t dangerous; it had been engineered to infect guinea-pig livers, part of a study tracing enzyme expression. The work would wait. He’d much rather stick here, tracing protein variants through an unexceptional biochemical pathway, than fly across the world to a place where people would be killing each other, but they’d made their plans long ago, and now it was time to see what they could do.

He looked at the sandwich with distaste, then looked back at Jake. “And—by

the way—you mean b’hatzlacha, not mazel tov. Mazel tov is for happy occasions.” It figured. He hated bean sprouts.

* * * *

Tuesday 26 March, Tel Aviv

The airport was crowded with people wailing to flee the country, grandmothers with paper bags full of possessions and arms full of children, business men with their laptops and cell phones, young mothers with infants sleeping over their shoulders, tourists whose vacations had been abruptly cut short. Foreigners, David noted; almost all foreigners. The Israelis weren’t leaving.

Every few yards was a soldier in full battle gear, submachine gun at hand, restless eyes scanning the crowd. Disembarking from the planes were mostly students who had been studying abroad. What little conversation there was was muted and purposeful: What unit are you with? Think they’re really serious, or are they just blowing hot air? Do you have a pickup? He could hear no idle chatter.

It reminded him of his own service, twenty years ago, doing the military duty he’d needed to put in to keep his dual citizenship. It had been fun, in its way. The old soldiers had talked endlessly about the Yom Kippur War, which back then hadn’t been so far in the past. They had an attitude combining tough masculinity with self-deprecating humor. They themselves had taken their jobs seriously, but while David had served, they had faced nothing more than thrown epithets. And in his off time he and Yossi had wandered the streets of Jerusalem, finding beauty equally in the narrow stone streets of the old city and in the cafes and high-rise apartments of the new.

The airport was more modern than he’d remembered, but then, it had been more than twenty years since he’d left. He hadn’t been back since.

From the airport he called Yosef, whom he’d known for years. Yossi was a companion from his military duty days—his best buddy, back then; Yossi had been smart, and athletic, and irreverent. “I’m a Jew by heritage, an atheist by choice,” Yossi had declared, and the two of them had defiantly found every restaurant in the city that served (not on the menu, of course) ham. They’d gotten along fabulously. Yossi had stayed with the Israeli defense forces, while David had gone back to America, first to graduate school, and then staying on in a series of postdocs and eventually an untenured research professorship. They’d kept in touch, mostly by e-mail these days, and when things started looking like they would get bad, he had told Yossi that when his service was needed, he would be there, and Yossi had in turn promised that there would be a place for him.

When David called, he found Yosef was already in the Kiriya, where an emergency meeting of the defense command was under way.

David made arrangements to meet him at the Defense Ministry early the next day, and found a hotel room off Ibn Gvirol Street. On the short walk from the corner where the bus had dropped him, he found a crummy, run-down restaurant, Yin-Yang Chinese Villa. There was time to kill. Without bothering to look at the menu, he sat down and asked for moo goo char shu, forgetting for a moment that he was no longer in America, and, miracle of miracles, they even had it.

* * * *

Wednesday 27 March, the Kiriya

The briefing room was small, spartan, and windowless. Stale smoke from half a dozen stubby, filterless cigarettes overpowered efforts of the tiny ventilation fan to clear the air. The men inside didn't notice the stale air. "So it's certain the Saudis are going to strike?" asked the prime minister.

"Yes."

The minister drummed his fingers against the table top. "And they are conducting their attack as we expected? From the staging area outside Aqaba?"

Our agents have heard no indication of a change."

"And the rest of the Arabs?"

"Mobilizing, but so far staying out. Waiting to see, I'm sure. But the Saudis will be bad enough, I think."

The prime minister turned to another man at the meeting. "What about the Americans? Will they help?"

"No. This time, they're leaving us strictly alone. The Saudis have been long-standing allies of theirs; they're playing this one, as they say it, strictly hands-off. We can't count on any support at all. However, our own people in America stand behind us, as always."

"In that case, we have no choice but to implement plan Aleph. Preemptive retaliation. Hit them first, hit them hard. Destroy their attack before they start."

"I'll notify the task force immediately," said Yosef Abrahms. He had risen quite a way in the army since the day long ago when he and David had fought side by side. "What target date?"

"Sunday. We will make the final dry run Friday, get a day of rest, and hit them early Sunday morning."

“Roger.”

* * * *

Wednesday 27 March, Jauf, Saudi Arabia

“So the Zionists think to attack Sunday.”

“That is what I have heard, my commander.”

“Then you have served well, Asim. None other than you could have so well penetrated the secrecy of the Israelites. You have done very well, indeed. And you shall be fittingly rewarded.”

“Thank you, my general. I do but the will of Allah.”

“And so shall it be. We will have a surprise. We will wait until they have all gathered together, and then strike on their Sabbath, when they’re unprepared. We will not be defeated!”

Asim saluted. “So let it be.”

* * * *

Thursday 28 March, Forward Camp Ben-Gurion

David stretched muscles that had grown sore under the rigor of military drills. Discipline was tight at the training camp. So far it had been only drills, but tomorrow morning at dawn, strike team Aleph would stage a full-scale practice attack against team Bet, a last practice for the coming strike. Walking through the camp, he came upon Yosef. He saluted.

“At ease, soldier. Nervous?”

“Not yet, sir. Ask me again right before the attack.”

Yosef chuckled. “So you’re a biologist now, I hear. What happened, you decided you didn’t like computers any more?”

David shrugged. “I still work with computers.”

“They should have put you with an Abach unit.”

“I asked for the front.”

Yosef clapped him on the shoulder. “In this one, I’m afraid everywhere will be the front.” He chuckled again. “So, I say, maybe you should be nervous today, soldier.”

Did he know anything? “No. I never get nervous until the day before. Last minute jitters.”

“*Nu?* Can you keep a secret, David?”

“You know me, Yossi. I don’t go around shooting my mouth off.” *If only you knew*, he thought.

“Then I will tell you the best-kept secret in Israel. The mock attack tomorrow will be the real thing. The Sunday date is a ruse, a little something for the Arab informers we know are in the camp. At midnight we will issue live ammo, and the helicopters will be waiting. And so it starts. Only three people know this. Now, including you, four. Are you ready?”

“So, why tell me? You seem quite confident I’m not going to talk it around.”

“I know you. And, I just felt like I had to tell somebody.” He shrugged. “Nerves, I guess. I’m not so iron-blooded as I like to pretend, sometimes. Why not you? Now are you nervous?”

“More than you could know, Yossi.”

* * * *

Saturday 30 March; Forward Camp Ben-Gurion

Yosef Abrahms looked around in despair, shivering in the cold desert night and trying to ignore the stench of diarrhea that permeated the air like the smell of rotting meat. It was nearly dawn, and there were only a very few men left standing. The camp was almost unprotected. The tanks were still loaded in the transport planes, ready for the airdrop, but there was nobody to unload them. The helicopters were ready for the attack, but there was nobody to fly them. It was no place to make a stand against the upcoming Arab attack.

If only a few more men were left! He’d done what he could with the few he had. He’d used the bulldozers to push a wall of earth around the encampment. That would slow them down a little. If only their preemptive attack had gone as planned! But who could have predicted the plague that had struck, out of nowhere, the night before the raid? No fatalities, yet—but the men were too weak to fight. Dizzy and disoriented, even the ones whose duties were flying computer screens were barely able to sit up, and the few who did were making mistakes that would be far too costly to allow them to strike as planned.

And of the few that seemed immune, his friend David had deserted, running off to hide in the desert. That was worst of all. He hated to think of David as a coward. David, who had been as brave as any man he'd known when they'd both done their service. But David had lived too long in America, where enemies didn't press in from every side, and time changes people. The strain of coming battle tells on all men.

In that hour after the devastating plague struck, when he realized that their attack would never happen, he'd sent a coded message back to headquarters, telling them to prepare plan Gabriel, the final defense of the homeland. Back in the heart of Israel, in a site so secret even he didn't know its location, nuclear technicians would be putting together components prepared long ago. If the Arabs insisted on driving them into the sea, they would find that the price was high.

He nibbled on a cold ham sandwich. Army food was Kosher, but nobody inspected his personal pack, and the sandwich was his personal act of independence.

He checked for the hundredth time that the rocket launcher and grenades were ready. At his feet, in easy reach, were laid out the cartridge belts for the machine gun and two Galil automatics, his regular gun and a spare, with extra clips. When the attack came, he would at least take some of them with him, and save just one bullet for the end. Soon. He waited.

And waited.

The attack never came. The sun rose, and the day was clear and hot. By noon he knew that the attack would never come. By the will of a god he didn't believe in, the plague—whatever it was—had hit the Arabs too.

* * * *

Tuesday 3 April, JFK Airport

Jake greeted David at the airport. There was no need to ask him how it had gone; they could both read it in the newspaper headlines. Emergency medical assistance was being rushed to both Saudi Arabia and Israel from all over the world, and a quarantine had been set up to prevent the mystery plague from spreading. David had exited just in time.

“Any problems?”

“A couple. It was tricky there for a while.” He shrugged. “Nothing major.”

“Was it really bad, out there?”

“Bad? Jake, you just couldn’t imagine! They thought it was doomsday! Everybody was certain that if virus nineteen didn’t kill them, the Arab attack would. I just wish I could have seen them when they finally found out that the Arabs had it, too.”

“I bet. Well, they’ll recover. After all, it’s only a reengineered version of the common cold, debilitating, but hardly fatal. Hey, don’t look gloomy—we did it! You know what? As of today, we’re the secret masters of the world. We should be celebrating.”

“Easy for you to say. You weren’t the one who had to betray his friends.”

“Betray, hell. We saved their lives and you know it.” Jake looked at his watch. “Half an hour at the earliest before Asim’s flight comes in.”

It would be good to see his grad student and swap some stories. Asim must have had just as hard a time of it, but he seemed to have succeeded in his mission as well as David had.

“So anyway,” Jake said, “how was your flight? Are you hungry? Maybe we should stop for a nice ham sandwich while we wait?”

Dave looked disgusted. “God no! I’ve been eating nothing but pork for the last week.”

Jake looked at him. “That seems rather over-overdoing it. Once a month is plenty.”

“Yeah, so you said. But I kept having nightmares that my immunity would fail.” Dave paused for a second and looked across at Jake. “Still, you know, it was rather a clever idea of yours to manufacture a virus whose growth is inhibited by a protein found only in pigs.”

Jake shrugged. “It’s my job to be clever. In a day or so some bright doctor will figure out the connection, and they’ll start synthesizing the protein. But what with both countries absolutely infested with reporters and doctors and International Red Cross teams, I doubt that either one will quite have the nerve to start a war. Not for a couple of years, anyway.”

“Still,” said Dave, “I don’t care if it is the only thing that gives immunity to number nineteen, I’d be happy if I never ate pork again in my life.”

“Suit yourself,” said Jake.