

Inception

By E. S. Strout MD

The Earth was waste and void; darkness covered the abyss. Genesis 1-2.

1.

The invader's RNA core and lipoprotein capsid were sharp and clear at 60,000X magnification on the electron microscope. It had rearranged the nucleotide sequences of the infected cell's chromosomes to enhance its own replication. The MEDIC computer digested its molecular structure and spat out a holographic 3-D construct.

"This is fascinating, Kathka," Doctor Velios said. "There's no antibody response."

"That explains the unopposed growth," Biotechnician Kathka said. "These test cells have all been destroyed."

"Yet control cells from the indigenous lifeforms on that asteroid were unaffected," Velios noted.

"You mean they were immune? Perhaps we are, also."

Velios held up a tissue culture plate.

"These infected cells are of our species, Kathka. We must begin Level-Five isolation. Now, please."

She punched a computer key. “Stasis field initiated.”

The doctor tugged at his uniform collar.

“I’d better inform the skipper.”

2

Captain Landar paced research probe STARCHASER’s bridge in quick, agitated steps. Her Medical Officer’s report was a source of unexpected aggravation. A virus from that last forbidding rock. Alien organisms were the norm, they’d discovered hundreds.

“What makes this one different?” she demanded.

“It destroys tissue culture cells,” Dr. Velios explained, “Without stimulating an antibody response.”

She spared him with an impatient glance. “Go on, Doctor.”

“I’ve searched the MEDIC files, Captain. There’s no other alien virus this infectious to cells of our species. We don’t know its mode of spread, its vectors. Suppose it escapes quarantine? We can’t take the chance.”

“So? Aren’t we immune, Doctor? To everything? Centuries of genetic engineering . . . ?”

Velios shuffled his feet.

“This organism defies all prior theory, Captain.”

“The safety directives are clear, Doctor. Any alien organism this dangerous must be destroyed. What steps have you taken?”

“It’s very hardy, sir. We’ve tried antivirals and neutron irradiation without success. Each time it mutates it becomes more resistant. And it’s rejected every benign viral RNA segment we’ve tried to splice. I’ve isolated it in a force field.”

“You’re monitoring, of course?”

“Yes, Captain. But if it mutates again our containment could be breached.”

“I’m convinced, Doctor. Stand by to off-load your bug.”

Dr. Velios snapped a heartfelt salute. “Yes, sir. I’m on it.”

3.

Landar viewed the NAV screen with interest. “What’s this, Lieutenant Beloch?”

“Alfa Sierra 9671, Captain,” the navigator replied. “Young galaxy, newly forming systems. No inhabited planets. We’ll pass within four light-years of its closest spiral arm.”

“Very well. Deceleration stations.” The klaxon sounded a short two-tone warning burst.

“Mister Mogrith, make your speed point-zero-zero-one Light.”

“Aye, Captain,” the helmsman replied. Starlines on the forward view screen shrank to single diamond points and inertial dampers shrieked as the spacecraft reentered normal space.

“One one-thousandth Light-Speed, sir.”

“Very well.” Captain Landar punched MEDICAL on the COMM panel. “Doctor Velios, you may jettison your package now.”

“Aye, Captain.” There was a muffled hiss as the shielded culture matrix was ejected.

4.

PROXIMITY ALERT

A brilliant star flashed to the forward view screen as the collision alarm sounded. “What in Perdition?” Captain Landar grasped the helmsman’s shoulder. “Starboard thrusters, Mister Mogrith. Emergency full!”

STARCHASER cleared the anomaly with a billion kilometers to spare.

“Explain, please, Lieutenant.”

Lt. Beloch scrolled star charts across the NAV screen, eyelids squinted in disbelief.

“It’s a new planetary system, Captain,” she stammered. “At the periphery of Alfa Sierra. There is no record in our database.”

“Why in Creation weren’t you long-range scanning?”

“We were clear of the rim stars. I didn’t think . . .”

The C.O.’s glare had a cut-glass edge.

“You didn’t think? You have placed us inside the acceptable distance limit.”

Lt. Beloch cringed. Landar was a tough, by-the-book commander, quick to punish negligent officers by court-martial.

“Bioscans now, please,” the Captain demanded.

Beloch punched keys, viewed long and short range scans.

“Yes! Take a look, sir. All the new system’s evolving planets read negative for lifeforms.”

“Thank Providence,” Captain Landar sighed with relief. Ejection of biologics within five light-years of inhabited systems was forbidden. The penalty for such an incursion was mandatory retirement and loss of pension for the Commanding Officer.

“Shall I enter the anomaly in our database, Captain?” Beloch asked.

“Negative, Lieutenant. We dodged a bullet this time. No need to invite a Board of Inquiry.”

“Thank you, sir.”

A menacing scowl from the skipper.

“No harm, no foul this time, Lieutenant. There will be no next time.”

Landar turned to the helmsman. “Let’s head for home, Mister Mogrith.”

“Intergalactic drive on line, Captain.”

“Very well. All ahead standard. Flank speed when clear.”

“Helm aye.”

There was a blinding greenish-white flicker as STARCHASER exited the unfolding planetary system.

5.

1976. A paleontology dig in southern Germany.

“No question, Doctor Leakey. These cave paintings and stone tools are late Pleistocene.”

The student brushed away soil to reveal the intact skeleton of a primeval hominid.

“Cro-Magnon remains, for sure. Beta carbon dating will get us back twenty-five, thirty thousand years. Maybe more.”

“I agree,” the Professor said. “Very astute, Mister Evans. This specimen seems quite well preserved.” He handed Evans a bone chisel.

“Crack that sternum and look for marrow residue. Our lab people are always looking for old DNA fragments.”

6.

One month later.

“Where did this sample come from, Professor Leakey,” Dr. Gerald Frey, Genetics Lab researcher asked?

“Sternal marrow residue, Jerry. A male Cro-Magnon, perhaps 20-30 years of age.”

“We’ve identified genetic fragments of an RNA retrovirus. It’s ancient. Pre-Proterozoic. No match in our database and . . .”

The scientist paused, took a deep breath.

“Go on, Doctor. Please?”

“It has nucleotide sequences that are identical to chromosomal loci in homo sapiens. Us.”

The paleontologist squinted a skeptical eye.

“You can determine this in a specimen twenty-plus thousand years old?”

“The climactic conditions in your cave must have been stable for millennia. Your Cro-Magnon’s marrow was remarkably well preserved.”

Professor Richard Leakey rested his chin on interlaced fingers.

“Come on, Jerry. This is too far-fetched, even for me.”

Dr. Frey handed him a cellulose sheet.

“Glass capillary electrophoresis. Latest hi-tech stuff for single-molecule DNA and RNA mapping. These are segments of a long arm of the X-chromosome of your caveman and mine alongside as a control. You can see the similarity.”

He tapped a smaller structure on a second cellulose sheet with his pen point. “This is the RNA structure of our ancient virus.”

Leakey perused the scramble of thin bandlike purple lines for a scant second, his lips pursing in a scowl.

“I know ancient bones, Jerry. Genetics is not yet my second language. Convince me.”

“Look at this.” He overlaid the smaller cellulose sheet over the larger and pointed again.

“I’m aligning the viral RNA segment with this little area of each X-chromosome arm and . . .”

“My God,” Professor Leakey marveled. “They’re identical.”

“That’s not all, Richard. Check this out.”

He produced an additional cellulose sheet. “This is a map of all forty-six chromosomes. Mine and your caveman’s again for comparison. There are little alien viral nucleotide sequences in each one. Plus, I’ve done similar studies on twenty-five randomly chosen, racially diverse employees. It’s present in every one.”

“For years these tiny loci were unusual chromosomal aberrations we couldn’t explain. And look here.”

He handed Dr. Leakey three Telex copies.

“Scientists at Johns Hopkins, Harvard and Stanford have reproduced my results. They’re excited as hell, want more samples.”

“Please, Doctor. The bottom line.”

The researcher responded in a cautious whisper.

“I can conclude with 0.95 probability that humans evolved from this primordial organism.”

Dr. Leakey’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“You’re telling me this minuscule fragment of viral RNA was the initial step in man’s genetic structure? Wouldn’t you need some DNA . . .?”

“Many viruses already have a double helix RNA configuration. This one does. It would be a simple developmental step to add the pentose sugar deoxyribose and substitute a thymine moiety for uracil. And if you believe the geologists it had a couple of billion years to evolve.”

“You’re certain about this, Jerry?”

“I was as skeptical as you, Richard.” he flattened out the Telex copies on the table top. “Now there’s verification.”

There was a long, pregnant silence before the paleontologist responded.

“You cannot imagine the upheavals this is going to cause in the scientific and theological communities. So Adam and Eve were bits of an extraterrestrial virus.”

He rattled the Telex copies in one hand. “We’d better get started on our publication before somebody else beats us to it.”

7.

The field telephone jangled.

“For you, Dr. Leakey,” Evans said. “It’s Sir Francis Crick. And he’s chuckling about something.”

The Professor grabbed the phone.

“All right, Francis, you S.O.B. Stop gloating. You were right. Life is too complex to have evolved de novo on Earth. What’s on your mind?”

Leakey exhaled a resigned sigh.

“Oh very well. Guess I don’t have much choice.” He clicked the phone off.

“What does he want, Richard?” Gerald Frey asked.

“First Author on our Original Article.”

The End