

Scimitar of God

by E.S. Strout

Wednesday July 29, 2009. 1644 hours:

An unmarked U-2 high altitude spy aircraft crossed the border of a hostile neighbor and was apprehended immediately by two Russian-built Sukhoi Su-27 Flanker fighter jets. When the trespassing plane failed to respond to challenge, it was neatly disposed of by two AA-12 Adder air-to-air missiles. Its cargo was dispersed into the turbulent and shifting jetstream.

Mission accomplished.

The Washington Post. Tuesday, August 4, 2009.

MUTATED H1N1 SWINE FLU VIRUS STILL BAFFLES SCIENTISTS

Worldwide outbreaks have resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. The U. S. Bureau of Health and Human Services has reported Middle Eastern countries have been hardest hit.

Immunization for ordinary H1N1 swine flu has proven ineffective. Laboratories at CDC and Fort Detrick are working overtime. No progress has been reported, but testing on polyvalent vaccines to include mutant strains continues. The oral and IV antivirals Tamiflu and Relenza have been of no benefit.

A few officials believe this agent is a bioweapon developed secretly. It was pointed out by most, however, that the casualty rates in Iran, Pakistan and other suspect nations on the Arabian peninsula were much higher than those throughout the rest of the world.

Updates to follow . . .

There were no further issues of the Post.

1.

Wednesday, August fifth. 0945 hours:

Eli Morrison, a tall forty-four year old man with prematurely graying temples, carefully packed a number of items in an attaché case. Included was a small cylinder containing two tiny vials.

He cast a final forlorn look around his Pentagon office, then sat down at his computer and typed an E-mail in a dialect known to few.

He ended it with, "I'm coming for you, Blade."

Eli listened again to Matt Pettit's voice mail message.

"Eli, you need to know something else about our virus. Please call. Urgent."

Eli tried again to return Matt's call. He was shunted to voice mail as before.

He shook his head sadly. "Go with God, Matthew."

A captive of security protocol, he pressed the SECURE stud on the digital lock pad as he left. Then a last glance at RUSSIAN AND SSR STUDIES etched in bronze on the door.

Eli had been an expert on the national and tribal customs and politics of Central and Southern Asia for twenty-two years.

"Matt and I tried to warn you back in January," he muttered sourly as he trod the silent corridors.

Eli had injected his own immunization shot minutes before the arrival of the pandemic wave. It was in one of two vials that had arrived by helicopter less than an hour previously.

An accompanying note from Major Matthew Pettit at Fort Detrick read:

"Eli, vial one contains two doses of attenuated mutant H1N1 flu virus. It should inactivate any virus reaching your system. Vial two is for that contingency scenario we discussed, should it arise. Good luck, my friend."

"I'm on my way, Matt."

Bodies were strewn throughout Pentagon rings, many having expired at their work stations, cups of still warm coffee on their desks. There was disarray in the parking lot, many vehicles with deceased victims jamming the exits.

Eli's card key opened the underground exit gate.

He gave a disconsolate final look back at the sprawling Pentagon rings. "Nobody listens, Matt," he grumbled.

2.

Eli drove. Route US 270 North was clear until he encountered impassable bottlenecks of crashed vehicles in Rockville.

His GPS feature led him through the side roads of south central Maryland. The trip would take two days.

Once he stopped to siphon gas from an abandoned SUV.

He drank a Pepsi and ate a ham and Swiss on rye sandwich he liberated from the fridge in a deserted diner.

An empty motel provided lodging where he grabbed six hours of sleep, cold shower and shave.

2.

U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID), Fort Detrick, Frederick, MD. Friday, August 7, 2009. 1035 hours.

Eli reached a barred gate with the bodies of four soldiers slumped in the guard shack.

He found the switch to raise the gate and drove through.

He stopped at an isolated single story building, the Decontamination Center.

A yellow BIOHAZARD decal loomed over its entrance. Eli pressed the correct numbers on a ten-digit key pad and was granted access.

The decontamination procedure was automated. It took one hour, including automated venipuncture for blood analysis.

Disposable clothing and slippers were available in the post-decon dressing room. Yellow arrows on the floor directed him to Debriefing.

An automated voice instructed him to place his right thumb against the conductive gel pad next to the door.

He did so.

The door swung open with a click to reveal a short passageway lined by reflective metallic material. A recorded voice warned:

There will be a ten second burst of antiviral UV radiation. Please close your eyes to avoid retinal injury.

Press the red stud to your left to initiate.

Another door clicked open after the UV assault.

The air conditioned debriefing room had two porthole-like windows. Its walls were of seamless white material of unfamiliar composition.

A security camera cast its unblinking red eye at his.

Eli mopped his face with a sleeve of his one-piece green jumpsuit. He settled in an uncomfortable contour plastic chair in front of a bare gray metal desk and waited.

After an hour and ten minutes of fidgeting he gave a frustrated shout.

“Matt? It’s Eli. I’m here.”

A second door clicked open seconds later.

3.

A thin blond, decently attractive woman eyed him without visible emotion as she entered. She wore no makeup and her puffy eyelids reflected lack of sleep.

She was dressed in a white doctor’s laboratory smock over green scrubs.

Her plastic ID tag read VICTORIA E. ROLFE M.D.

She took a seat behind the desk, then removed an Ibook laptop from its carrying case, booted it up and pressed keys.

Her voice was alto in register, pleasantly modulated.

“Mister Morrison, you have cleared decontamination procedures successfully. Lab results confirm your immunity to the genetically altered swine flu virus. You still carry the inactivated virus, so you must have had a very early infection.”

“Yes. I understand that can happen.”

She pressed more keys, frowned. “Your identification has a security block. Why is that?”

“There’s no more security, Dr. Rolfe. I worked at the Pentagon. Russian and SSR studies”

Eli said, “Now I have a question. How did you survive?”

“This building has an ultra-fine filter pore air filtration system that activates at first alert. The screen is too small for any virus to penetrate.”

“You are very lucky, Dr. Rolfe.”

Her gaze was penetrating. “Enough. Why are you here, Mr. Morrison?”
“Did Major Matt Pettit survive?”

She shook her head. “Dr. Pettit was caught outside trying to reach the Decon Center.”

Eli nodded, dipped his head in solemn acknowledgement.

“Matt would have explained to you why I was coming.”

“There is no longer a military presence here,” Dr. Rolfe said. “Only myself and a lab technician survived.”

“Now please tell me why you are here, Mr. Morrison,” she insisted.

“I need your cryogenics procedure.”

She blinked an unbelieving glare. “It’s a scam. Freeze you, awaken you sometime in the future. You’ve come to the wrong place.”

“Tell me about Project Icecube.”

Her eyes blinked again. “How can you know . . .?”

“Victoria, I have been a Pentagon spook for twenty-two years. I have Q level clearance. I know of your cryogenic testing.”

There was a quiet pause as Dr. Rolfe stared at the desktop.

“Our results were not encouraging,” she admitted in a hushed voice.

Eli said, “True, but it can still help me.”

“For what purpose, Mr. Morrison? We’re finished here. There are rations for less than a year. We have suicide capsules.”

“So none of you are immune?”

She let out a resigned sigh. “Our emergency supply of vaccine was appropriated for high government officials.”

Her neutral glance was now tinged with hostility. “I presume you are one of them.”

“Theirs didn’t work.” Eli said.

“No? I don’t understand.”

“Matt sent me a vial of his new polyvalent vaccine two days ago. He said it had a less than ten percent chance of working.”

“Lucky you.”

“Thanks to whatever gods watch over us. Now there’s an outside chance.”

Dr. Rolfe gave a tired head shake. “Chance for what?”

“The virus is a bioweapon, Victoria. Matt and I knew that.”

4.

Her voice was clouded with skepticism. “Suppose I accept your credentials and theories, Mister Morrison. Why a bioweapon instead of just some freak laboratory accident?”

“There were two CDs in plastic sleeves in my belongings removed for the decon procedure. Did you listen to them?”

Dr. Rolfe nodded sadly. “Just the first one. Very distressing. I couldn’t go on.”

“I understand,” Eli said. “That one’s a copy of the transmissions from Fort Detrick’s overseas resources. They were all . . . “

“ . . . overwhelmed by a rapidly spreading, lethal and self-replicating virus,” Dr. Rolfe said, blotting tears from her eyes.

Eli nodded. “Ours met the same fate.”

5.

“A bioweapon, you say?”

Eli’s voice was low, insistent. “You need to know the details.”

Dr. Rolfe sat back, blotted her eyes again. “Please.”

“On July 29th, a U-2 high altitude reconnaissance aircraft overflew the border of one of the SSR’s, doesn’t matter which one.”

“It was demolished by air-to-air missiles from Russian-built fighter jets”

Eli continued, “Ruptured containers of virus were swept away in the jet stream. We had agents on the ground in Pakistan and Afghanistan. They were able to report before they died.”

Victoria blotted her eyes again. “Who was responsible?”

“A group of extremists inhabiting some of the SSRs bordering the old Soviet Union. They are known as Scimitar of God. Their leader calls himself The Blade of Justice.”

“D.O.D. believed it was a local dispute gone wrong,” he said. “Matt and I knew it was not.”

“Why didn’t they believe you?”

Eli’s voice was grim and embittered. “Matt Pettit and I tried for months, but interagency red tape and one-upsmanship prevailed. When they finally woke up, it was too late.”

Eli sighed, massaged his face with both hands. “This is a festering sore point with me. Please forgive the outburst, Victoria.”

“What convinced you, Eli?” Victoria asked in a soft voice.

“Atmospheric conditions and wind direction,” he said.

“The air flow was southwesterly, a diversion of the normal jet stream direction for the area. And very strong.”

“The Blade had very accurate weather reports. Timing and flight path of their aircraft were critical for optimum results. All he had to do was wait.”

Victoria gave him a dubious glance. “Why would he wait?”

“The Blade didn’t want al Qaeda to get the credit. He had to make sure the Middle East was hit first.”

5.

There were moments of stunned silence. Dr. Rolfe paced behind the desk, poured more coffee into a Styroform cup from a large Thermos container. She drank and paced some more.

“Can you spare some coffee?” Eli asked.

She passed him a cupful.

Dr. Rolfe pounded a fist on the desk top in frustration. “So you knew it was deliberate. What am I supposed to do?”

“Freeze me.”

6.

Victoria’s voice rose half a decibel. “That’s insane talk, Eli.”

He shook his head. “I’ve read the project reports. Human volunteers have been frozen right here at Fort Detrick. Do you deny it?”

No response.

“You forget, Dr. Rolfe. I had access to all classified bioscience projects. Tell me about nanotechnology reanimation of frozen volunteers.”

There was a pause. Dr. Rolfe shuffled papers on the desk, then looked up. She gave a soft sigh, nodded.

“There were four survivors of a five-year freeze. Criminals serving life sentences who volunteered. If they survived, their death sentences were to be reduced to life without possibility of parole.”

“Out of how many, Victoria.”

“Thirty-six. An 11.1% survival rate.”

“What were the physical conditions of the survivors?”

She stared at the desk top. “Motor functions restored in three of them. Mental skills decreased to IQs in the 50 to 60 range.”

“They were returned to the Maryland Penal System, where they perished in the flu pandemic.”

“And the fourth?”

“Mental facilities normal but incomplete reconstitution of the spinal cord. He was quadriplegic. Returned to a prison hospital, died in the pandemic.”

7.

Eli whistled. “Whew. One out of thirty-six with some brain cells left. Doesn’t say much for my chances, does it, Victoria?”

Dr. Rolfe stuffed her hands in the lab coat’s pockets.

“No,” she said in a barely audible voice. “Your probability of survival with an intact cerebrum is 0.0278.”

He nodded. “Roughly 2.8%. Doesn’t matter.”

“How can you say that?”

“Whatever the outcome, I’m the only chance.”

Dr. Rolfe shook her head. “You’re immune. You could stay with us and leave when we’re gone.”

“Not a good choice, Dr. Rolfe. Two percent gives me a slight chance. Otherwise, The Blade’s success is certain.”

“Please explain.”

Eli rested his head on the desk, whispered, “It’s complicated, Victoria.”

“Are you okay?”

“I haven’t eaten in two days, not to mention the stress and fatigue.”

8.

Dr. Rolfe walked to an office door. "Be right back."

Eli drank more coffee. He dug through his few belongings and laid the second CD on Dr. Rolfe's desk.

"Aha," Victoria said as she returned with two deli sandwiches.

She pulled a Pepsi can from each pocket of her lab coat, set them on the desk and popped the tabs.

She smiled. "Lunch is on me."

Eli took voracious bites and chugged the Pepsi in long swallows

"Bless you, Victoria Rolfe."

He nodded at the CD on the desk.

"The second disc. Made early morning of August fifth. You need to hear it."

9.

Eli's voice was soft and concise as he itemized his findings. The recording took thirty minutes.

Victoria's response was a mixture of confused awe, tinged with anger. "Your Pentagon bosses didn't like you and Major Pettit very much."

He nodded. "Matt was very restrained. I was insubordinate. I yelled, cursed, threatened physical violence. They remained adamantly opposed. Security had to remove me from the Chief's office by force."

"What could they have done, Eli?"

A sad head shake. "By then it was at least six months too late, and no specific location was known."

"Why not send the Air Force with some . . .?"

Eli's neck flushed with anger.

"What would you have done, Dr. Rolfe? Drop a dozen or so thermonuclear bombs for random targets? Or carpet bomb with a hundred fifty to nuke the whole of South Central Asia?"

“Saved us for what, Victoria?” He shouted, “To die a slow death of radiation poisoning from world wide fallout?”

For long seconds Victoria wouldn't meet his eyes. Then she nodded. “I'm sure you and Major Pettit did your best.”

Placated, Eli smiled. “There's a lot more to this story, Victoria.”

She rested her elbows on the desk, chin in one hand. “Please tell me.”
“I'll tell you how I got involved.”

10.

“The Blade had a recruiting website. I found it. The usual trash talk. Join Scimitar of God and help slay all the nonbelievers.”

Her brow creased with doubt “It must have been password protected, Eli. And probably in some weird local dialect.”

“I understand and speak all their languages and weird dialects, Victoria.”
“You? Eli Morrison, Pentagon spook?”

He smiled. “The Blade is an arrogant and egotistical sociopath. His password was the first thing I tried.”

Blade of Justice.

Dr. Rolfe's face and eyes spoke silent questions. “It's almost like you knew them.”

“I grew up there.”

She laid a hand on his arm. “You are a paradox wrapped in an enigma, Eli. Please go on.”

“When I was 17, I chose an American name, after a family that had helped us.”

Victoria's eyes blinked. “Why am I not surprised?”

He nodded. “I was born in Chechnya. My parents and I escaped in time to avoid the evolving turmoil of the 1990's.”

“I grew up in the SSRs, Russia, Pakistan and Northern India.” “Languages and their local dialects were easy. Something about an overdeveloped temporal lobe gyrus in the brain.”

Eli continued, "I came here when I was sixteen, with all those languages and local dialects firmly embedded. Learning English was a piece of cake."

"You're a polyglot."

Eli smiled. "More like an idiot savant."

Victoria tried to stifle a giggle. "And you're a U.S. citizen now."

He nodded. "Passing the citizenship exams was the proudest moment of my life, Victoria."

"When I was 22, my knowledge of languages and customs of the South Central Asia region earned me a position in the Department of Defense."

"You must have been promoted at once."

An odd grin. "Administrative politics and intrigue gave me migraines. I liked being a pencil pusher."

11.

"This Scimitar of God. Are they Muslims?" Victoria asked.

"No. They scorn the Muslims as traitors to God's law. They are a ruthless bunch with a very intelligent leader. Less than a thousand of them at first, but increasing as their influence spread throughout central Asia and the Middle East."

Eli paused and massaged his temples with fingertips, emitted a soft sigh.

"The Blade has a similar background as I. Born in Chechnya, he was well acquainted with al Qaeda's leader."

"Bin Laden introduced him to two Pakistani scientists who developed this mutated flu bug to use locally against India."

"Matt and I began to suspect back in January when the two Pakistanis disappeared. Then our source on the ground was found beheaded. We think Bin Laden was also executed."

Dr. Rolfe slumped in her chair, holding her face in her hands. "This is monstrous."

Eli reached across and touched her hand. "Victoria, The Blade has slaughtered millions. I've called him out."

Victoria took a deep breath, paced, drank more coffee. “So you, the Chechen enigma, have challenged him.”

“Yes.”

“Why would this lunatic be concerned about the defiance of a pencil pusher?” she asked.

“It’s a matter of honor and personal prestige. I e-mailed him in our language, insulted him in the worst possible way.”

Victoria’s brow creased with uncertainty. “What possible insult . . .?”

“I told him his Blade was as limp as his penis.”

“He must avenge his ego by killing me with his own hands.”

Stunned, she clapped a hand to her face. “Oh good God, Eli. He’s coming here.”

A head shake. “Not yet. Their logistics and transport facilities are still primitive. I’m estimating it will take The Blade between five and six years to get here.”

Dr. Rolfe’s face clouded with doubt. “Why so long? They rebuilt a spy aircraft.”

Eli nodded. “It took them ten years. Finding parts, technicians and financing consumed most of that time. And they still had to deal with the Pakistanis for the bioweapon.”

“But ten years? I couldn’t freeze you for that long. Even five years is iffy, as you have seen in our results.”

“They are much better organized now, but they will still need to find experts and craftsmen to reestablish global transportation.”

Victoria cast a skeptical eye. “Won’t there be isolated pockets of survivors? He could find them there.”

Eli nodded. “I’m sure he has. In low valleys or underground where the flu bug has not yet penetrated.”

“The Blade will offer them immunization and join the Scimitar of God. Otherwise, lose their heads.”

“So all your bad guys are immune?” Victoria asked.

“Those Pakistani scientists had developed a vaccine.”

She gave Eli a skeptical stare. “How can you know this? Your source was killed.”

“May I use your laptop?”

She slid it across the desk.

Eli pounded keys, then slid it back.

“I decrypted and translated this from their website. Communications between them and the Pakistanis. Mostly regarding payment, but a couple of interesting items slipped in.”

Dr. Rolfe read for a full five minutes, then took a deep breath. “My God, Eli. They admit murdering the Pakistani scientists. Those interesting items are small segments of a complex organic compound.”

“It’s little pieces of the procedure, Vicki. Matt Pettit and the CDC guys were able to connect them and produce a minuscule amount of vaccine.”

She nodded. “And Major Pettit sent you the real thing.”

“Yes. A contingency vial also.”

13.

Victoria leaned back in her chair, stared at the ceiling for several seconds. “This is a tough story to digest, Eli.”

He nodded. “Matt left me a voice mail, something I should know about the virus, but I wasn’t able to get back to him in time. Did he say anything to you?”

“Not a word. I tried to access his computer files after you arrived today. All encrypted except for a single sentence fragment.”

“Which was?”

She pulled a memo pad from a pocket, flipped pages. “. . . contingency sample is dangerous. Use only as a last . . .”

“He was trying to send me an E-mail, Vicki.”

“Do you think it could have made a difference?”

“Matt thought so. That’s why I must go.”

“You could die in the hibernation process, Eli.”

“Cryogenics is the best chance, Vicki. I need five years.”

“Suppose, Eli, you survive to confront this maniac. What can you do?”

Eli shrugged. “Hope and pray.”

She clasped her hands tight on the desk top. “Stay here. I’d welcome the company.”

Eli shook his head. “Your provisions are limited, Victoria. I’d be an extra mouth to feed. And who can say what psychoses could arise from prolonged isolation. You only have two suicide pills.”

“Eli, you don’t know what Major Pettit found out about the virus.”

He shrugged. “It had to be something in that sentence fragment. Any guesses, Vicki?”

“Maybe how long the initial immunization lasts until booster shots are required.” She said.

Eli stared. “Keep going.”

“Five years is usual.”

“Five years,” Eli repeated, his voice quivering with sudden interest.

Victoria nodded. “So maybe The Blade murdered those Pakistani scientists before they produced enough booster shots.”

“A couple of other possibilities,” she said, resting her chin in one hand.

“I’m listening.”

“Perhaps the virus will mutate to a more or lesser severe form. Or even lose all potential to infect.”

Eli reached over and gripped her shoulder. “Or lose the potential to infect? Wow. You sound like Matt, Vicki. Thank you. We could be on to something.”

Victoria nodded. "I know Major Pettit was a virologist. He mentioned that he was working with attenuated strains of H1N1 flu viruses for a vaccine."

"Attenuated meaning a weaker strain?"

"Like the one you got. Full strength would kill you."

"Hmm. I wonder . . ."

14.

"Did you lose someone, Eli?" Dr. Rolfe asked.

He nodded. "Wife Jennifer and fourteen year old daughter Laurel. First year student at Chevy Chase High."

"And you?"

"Husband Charles. One of the microbiologists here. Married one year ago. Caught outside when the wave hit."

Then she broke down in tears. "Our three month old son Chris and the sitter . . . Oh God."

"I'm so sorry, Vicki."

They approached, tentatively at first, then met in a long tearful embrace.

Dr. Rolfe dried her eyes with a tissue. "I'm going with you."

A sad head shake. "This is a one person trip, Vicki. At best a suicide mission . . ."

She stood and shot him an unyielding stare. "No arguments, Eli Morrison of Chechnya. There's nothing left for me here. I know I can help."

"Vicki, I'll need you to start the procedure."

She smiled. "It's automated. There are two steel capsules right here in this building. Our blood will be kept in cryopreservative and retransfused as the procedure ends. Nanotechnology should repair most tissue damage I can initiate the process with one key stroke."

Eli produced a small vial sealed with a rubber stopper. He withdrew amber fluid with a syringe. "Hold out your arm, Vicki."

“What is it?”

“A dose of Matt’s vaccine that I received.”

“What’s in that other vial?”

“That dangerous contingency of Matt’s.”

“That’s cryptic. Dangerous how?”

“Matt said I’d know what to do.”

“I’m ready, Eli.”

15.

Dr. Rolfe pressed a computer key. Two horizontal steel cylinders with clear plastic faceplates rose from slots in the deck.

She pressed another key. A cloud of frozen CO2 mist began to fill each chamber.

“Please get in, Eli. The process is automated and will commence in thirty seconds. I will press the final start key then.”

Eli stroked her hair and gave her a soft kiss. “Whatever happens, Vicki, we tried.”

She gave him a tearful smile, returned the kiss.

“There is an anesthetic gas in the mist. Grip the handholds on either side of the couch so that the automated venipuncture apparatus can find a vein.”

Dr. Rolfe shed her lab coat and shoes, climbed into the second chamber and clicked her remote. The two faceplates closed with a defining snap.

16.

Tuesday, September 2, 2014. 0845 hours.

Eli Morrison awoke, stretched, took a whiff of oxygen from the mask that had descended over his face. A kaleidoscopic array of brilliant colors assaulted his cerebrum. He blinked.

Everything came back in a flash. The Scimitar of God, the freezing, Victoria.

When he exited from the cryogenic tube's couch he stumbled, fell. He could only move along by supporting himself on adjacent structures.

A blinking line of text on the tube's control console read: INCOMPLETE RESTORATION OF LUMBAR VERTEBRAL ARTERIES. PARTIAL PARAPLEGIC OUTCOME. CEREBRAL FUNCTIONS UNAFFECTED.

"At least I'm not brain dead," he muttered.

He staggered to Victoria's cryo tube.

"Vicki, we made it."

No response.

A red warning blinked on the tube's instrument console. BIOMAINTEENANCE FAILURE. LIFE FUNCTIONS TERMINATED.

Victoria Rolfe's lifeless body lay in peaceful repose.

Eli spent a tearful interlude of grief, then exhaled a resolute breath.

"I'll fix it for you and Matt, Vicki."

17.

Tuesday, September 9. 0900 hours.

Eli had the emergency generator running for electricity and hot water. The decon facility's water supply was intact.

He had reset his calendar watch by the digital time-date function of his cryo tube. "September 9th. Good."

A small pantry provided dry cereal and canned fruit for breakfasts. He had improvised two makeshift crutches for mobility.

A week passed, then two. He found shaving gear and toiletries that the technicians had left. He chuckled at his mirror image after an impromptu haircut.

The microwave still worked and he could heat up some palatable Army MRE's.

It took four days for him to drag Victoria's swivel chair a quarter mile to a small hill that overlooked Fort Detrick's concrete paved heliport.

18.

"October first. Damn. Where is he?"

Then came a slowly increasing sound of helicopters.

"About time, Blade."

"Time to greet our guests. Wish me luck, Vicki."

Eli hobbled to the swivel chair in record time, discarded his juryrigged crutches, took a seat.

He donned aviator sunglasses. He popped the tab on a Pepsi can, took a swallow, set the can on the chair arm.

Eli withdrew a one cc syringe from the breast pocket of his shirt. It contained clear fluid from the second vial. His closed right hand concealed it.

19.

The Scimitar of God's entourage consisted of ten helicopter loads of over one hundred dedicated tribal leaders. Each wore native regalia and bore a short, curved scimitar in a sheath on the belt. They moved in close, led by The Blade of Justice.

He was dressed as a conservative business executive. Tan slacks, white shirt and bright red tie. He wore reflective sunglasses. His features were Caucasian.

His voice was loud and challenging. "So you dare to humiliate the Blade of Justice, Eli of Chechnya?"

Eli smiled and nodded. "I see you've brought some friends to enjoy the execution."

A black scowl from The Blade. "Your death will be slow and painful. I will begin with the organ described in your insult."

He held out a hand. A senior tribesman placed the haft of a bejewelled blade in it.

Eli unsheathed the syringe needle and plunged it into the unfeeling muscle of his thigh.

“How’s your immunization holding out? Aren’t you due for boosters?” he shouted in The Blade’s language.

The tribesmen hesitated, an odd, questioning look on their faces. The Blade was undaunted smiled, held up a hand.

“Nice try, Eli. The Pakistanis told us that in five years the sun would purge all traces of the virus from the world. No boosters needed. It is our world now.”

Eli chuckled. “I think not.”

20.

Vial two is for a contingency that I will explain . . .

“No explanation needed, Matt. Well done,” he whispered.

He turned to The Blade. “You are correct of course. No virus left on the world.”

“But I still bear the original virus. It has been dormant in my body, inactivated by my immunization. It has not been exposed to sunlight.”

Eli held up the syringe, tossed it to the ground and coughed up a glob of bloody sputum. “This injection is my contingency. It contains enough full strength H1N1 flu virus to overcome my immunization, awaken the original mutated swine flu virus in my body and join with them.”

“Matt Pettit, a good friend of mine, ran simulations and determined that the result would be incredibly virulent - much worse than the one your Pakistani scientists engineered.”

“The lungs would be compromised and begin to hemorrhage within five minutes of exposure.”

“Do you feel all right, Blade?” Eli asked. “It’s been about five minutes.”

The tribesmen were already showing symptoms. Many collapsed dead in their tracks.

The Blade staggered forward, coughing up gobs of blood clots. Fevered rage contorted his face. He raised the scimitar in both hands.

Eli smiled as the blade descended.

“Vicki . . .”

The End