

Chapter 2 – A Danger to our Way of Life from SURVIVAL INSTINCT

It had been another hot day in les banlieues. Granddad Benjamin, Mémé and Alexander complained to each other about the stifling heat. Andrea did not offer an opinion but appeared to remain cool all day. Eric and Ursula loved it and spent most of the time sunbathing on the balcony amongst Mémé's plants. By the time the sun had set, their wrinkles had visibly reduced and they were buzzing. Mémé sent them to the roof to let off some energy.

When they had gone, Mémé closed the door to the balcony, in spite of the heat, and joined Granddad Benjamin on the itchy sofa. Andrea and Alexander pulled up two chairs and sat in front of them.

"Now we can talk," said Mémé forcefully.

"What have you found out?" asked Granddad Benjamin eagerly. "Is there a cure?"

Andrea answered, "Alexander and I took the blood samples we obtained from Eric and Ursula to a laboratory. We have rented this institution in order to ensure privacy but it does not cost much. We paid for this from the trust fund that I established for Eric and Ursula. The accounts are listed here."

Andrea handed over a bank statement to the Benjamins, which contained two very large numbers. Granddad Benjamin's eyes widened considerably when he saw the amounts.

Alexander removed his sunglasses and continued, "As you know we are trying to discover two things. Firstly, what it is that is making the children's bodies degenerate so quickly after intense activity? Secondly, why they are appearing to age faster than they should? We've run lots of tests on their blood and found some interesting properties. One, their blood responds to bright light but we are unsure as to what extent at the moment. Two, their blood is unique. It is not any of the most common groups. Those being A, B, AB or O, and we have yet to match it against any other group. This is not altogether surprising. Three, it has a characteristic which, so far at least, we have been unable to classify. Again this is not surprising. Four, Eric's and Ursula's blood have the same properties."

"But have you found a cure?" asked Granddad Benjamin, gripping Mémé's hand firmly. It was the only answer he cared about.

The question was not one Alexander welcomed and his fingers crept towards his mouth. As he pondered his response, he had to fight to keep himself from biting his fingernails and the skin around them.

In her usual, blunt way, Andrea replied for him, "No, our best estimate is that they will die before they are fourteen."

As the Benjamin's jaws dropped and their eyes welled up with tears, Alexander quickly added, "But we both believe that we can at least delay this and at best stop it completely so they can live long and happy lives. This is our goal."

The Benjamin's faces rose slightly.

"What will you do now?" asked Mémé, her voice and hands shaking.

"We will find a cure," stated Andrea, as if it was the most obvious answer in the world. "It will not be an easy or quick process. The children must stay here out of danger. It is essential that they are not spotted by the OSS."

Up on the roof, it was almost pitch black. Only a small beam from the crescent moon lit up the two dark silhouettes. They were doing gymnastics over the concrete – running, jumping, spinning in the air and landing perfectly. Ursula applauded Eric, but Eric just shrugged his shoulders at Ursula's skills. She was used to it; he was quick to find fault and rarely congratulated her. After a while, they stopped and sat on the edge of the building. Their legs dangled over the side and hung in the air eight stories up.

"Why don't we talk about you-know-what?" asked Ursula.

“You mean their prediction that we are going to die?” replied Eric without blinking.

“Yes.”

“Because we are young, fit and healthy. How could we do what we have just done if we’re supposed to die? It’s obviously a mistake.”

“What about the wrinkles?” asked Ursula touching the faded lines around her eyes.

“You seem to have more than me, so that’s probably because you’re always complaining that you are tired and don’t get enough sleep.”

“That’s your fault.”

“You can’t blame me if you can’t sleep properly,” said Eric without any trace of humour.

Ursula chose to change the subject, “What about the grey in our hair?”

“What about it? The only reason hair goes grey is because the pigment cells die out as it doesn’t get as much melanin.”

“But they are dying out,” said Ursula concerned.

“It could be due to stress and it may be a good sign.”

“How can this be good? Old people get grey hairs and then they die!”

“Not just old people.”

“That’s the point.”

“When I was stuck indoors in Prague with Alexander, I read some medical articles by a Doctor Fischer from Harvard Medical School. He thinks greying hair might actually be a safety mechanism that the body uses as it removes damaged stem cells.”

“So you’re saying we’re not dying?”

“We are not dying! Do you feel like you’re dying? I don’t.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Now let’s talk about something else.”

To make sure the adults would not hear, they whispered and put together the final details of their plan. It involved escaping their prison for one evening, during which they would watch a game of football at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis. They were finally going to have some freedom.

Jean Kurtz was average in height, average in features and if a hair style could be average then she had that too. Her face was contorting and her body shaking under her white lab coat. She had just stabbed herself in the hand with a screwdriver.

A rapidly expanding red circle began to fill her palm. As she moved a drop of blood fell and landed on the pristine floor of the makeshift laboratory.

It had been built using large grey panels and then sealed inside an enormous, clear tent. A noisy air pump kept the tent inflated which also kept the area a lot cooler than the rest of the base. Outside the tent, a secret air force base went about its work. Soldiers marched, mechanics checked aeroplanes, jeeps drove personnel around and drills were repeatedly practised.

Kurtz raised her grey eyes and, looking at the high cave ceiling beyond the tent, allowed herself a thin smile. She loved keeping secrets and lying to people. Being part of this base gave her the perfect excuse to do both.

She brought her gaze back to the two silver pods. One had been retrieved from a small town in Romania; the other from the ancient city of Pompeii. These pods had brought the mutant children to Earth. Only a select number of people knew of the pods’ existence and Agent Angel had made it quite clear that this was the way it was going to stay. The pods rested on X-shaped supports and resembled two sycamore seeds. However, they could not fly to the ground now like helicopters as the long wing, if there had been one, looked as if it had been removed. Unfortunately, just like the seeds, the pods were closed.

They had been opened originally by Professor Schwarzkopf, a man whom she despised and viewed as a scientific dinosaur. She also feared that he had a conscience. After watching his horrified reaction to Team Omega chasing the mutant children down Mount Vesuvius, she was convinced of this. To make matters worse, Professor Schwarzkopf was also a man who refused to share his secrets, a trait that she just couldn't stand in other people. Despite her best efforts at being sociable, flattering and even flirting with the decrepit old man, he had refused to tell her how he had opened the pods.

Shortly after he had left the base and returned home, the pods closed again and no matter what she, or her team, did they just wouldn't open. She declined to mention this in her reports to Agent Angel. As she had just proven, even attacking the smooth metal surface with a screwdriver didn't leave a scratch.

Kurtz sat heavily on the ground beside the pods and looked at her hand. She was in pain but she was also angry at the lack of progress her team was making. As she reflected on this Doctor Khan, Professor Li and Professor Warne were marched sheepishly into the room. They were followed by Agent Angel who took long, purposeful strides. He towered above the scientists and a floodlight behind him meant that they were literally in his shadow. He halted and his face was calm. However, when he crossed his trunk-like arms in front of his chest, Kurtz knew a storm was brewing.

"I found these 'scientists'," he said the word with contempt, "outside the hanger, sat on their butts enjoying cans of coke and the hot summer sun."

"That's right," said Kurtz in her whiney voice. "They were on their break."

"And I walk in here to find you on your tush with the pods not open. Despite repeating to you, in language that I believe is clear, the urgency of this situation. Was I not clear enough when I told you that whatever was in those pods could change our way of life forever?"

He lit up a cigarette and Kurtz wondered whether she should tell him not to smoke in her lab or defend her team or answer the question. She decided it was safest to defend her team.

"They were on their break, Sir."

Agent Angel raised his hand and then reluctantly dropped it again. "Do I look dumb to you, Kurtz?"

"No, Sir."

"Then why do you insist on telling me things twice, as if I am some kind of imbecile. Do you think your Great- Great-Granddaddy could have afforded a break as he sat in his trench waiting for the enemy to attack?"

Before Kurtz had time to protest, Agent Angel continued. "The answer you were about to give me is, 'no, Sir,' and that is darn right. Because during that break he would have been shot and bayoneted before he had even opened his coke. It's a good job your Great- Great-Granddaddy cannot see you now and I won't mention it to your daddy when I see him next either. NOW GET UP!"

Kurtz got up, without putting her bleeding hand on the ground, and stood with the other scientists. There were occasions when she hated Agent Angel and she contemplated telling her father. It would be a good idea to put the knife into him before he did it to her. After all, Angel had to answer somebody, hadn't he?

Agent Angel stepped towards them and placed his arms behind his broad back. The cigarette smoke wafted upwards and looked as if it was coming from his head.

"You work for me and I like my men, and women, working around the clock. From now on you work in two teams of two, in eight hour shifts, with split breaks. Do I make myself clear?"

All the scientists, except Kurtz, were visibly shaken and looked for places to hide. Kurtz, on the other hand, seemed to have other things on her mind.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said. “I’ve had trouble trying to explain to my team the gravity of this assignment.”

The other scientists looked on incredulously, as if this was news to them.

“Don’t give me that bull, Kurtz. I’ve been told that you are a fine scientist, which I grudgingly agree with on occasions. I can also see for myself that you are a morally suspect individual which suits me just fine. However, you are definitely a poor liar and I cannot abide liars.”

Kurtz looked to be on the verge of protesting and her mouth opened but she thought better of it.

Agent Angel slowly bent forward, so he was face-to-face with Kurtz. He was so close she could smell the cigarette on his breath.

“I’m now going to ask you a question and I want you to cut the baloney and give me a solid, straight answer. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Sir,” replied Kurtz, a faint quiver in her voice.

Speaking very slowly, one word at a time Agent Angel asked, “Can... you... create... my... identical... hybrid... beings?”

“Well, we’ve had some set-backs with the DNA. Plus the four discs you gave me have been helpful but not conclusive, for instance disc one is corrupted. In addition, the pods are not opening. But given one of those kids and a bit of time...” began Kurtz rapidly.

Agent Angel raised his hand, “Cut the crap, I don’t have time for it. You will get your kid, don’t worry. I will ask again. Can you create my identical hybrid beings? One word – yes or no?”

Kurtz hesitated and then quietly replied, “No.”

It was the answer Agent Angel had expected but not wanted. He promptly raised himself to his full height, clipped his heels together and strode away from the scientists.

“Schwarzkopf will be here by the morning and make sure he does not see any of those four discs,” he boomed as he left.