

The genome

Novel

Janick Laberge

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ISBN: 979-10-359-1386-1

Science is a powerful instrument. How it is used, whether it is a blessing or a curse to mankind, depends on mankind and not on the instrument. A knife is useful, but it can also kill.

Albert Einstein

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1.

Quebec, June 18, 2025.

A long-haired white ghost has haunted the village of Kemaman in northeast Malaysia over the past few days, scaring superstitious residents into staying at home to avoid being infected with a new, unidentified infectious disease. He is alleged to be the very man who, in 2020, happened to don a long white tunic, mask and wig to perform night patrols so that residents would respect lockdown during the deadly coronavirus pandemic. This individual's original initiative to convince people to stay at home proved to be very effective in a country where beliefs in supernatural beings remain strong, especially in rural areas. Besides the presence of this colorful character, rumors are circulating. Authorities have tightened security around the Malaysia Genome Institute in Kuala Lumpur. The population is worried.

Julia interrupted her reading aloud of *Le Nouvelliste*, looked up from her tablet and turned to her husband.

—See, honey, it looks as if the inhabitants of this Malaysian village,

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who saw the “ghost” roaming the streets at night, scrambled back home like headless chickens. Afterward, before going out, they thought twice about it and double-checked to see if the mysterious and spooky specter was around.

—Quite an original method of protection, Luc commented, but was it effective?

—From what I remember, Malaysia did much better than us in curbing the spread of the virus.

—Did they? To what extent? Luc asked, placing his knife on the edge of his plate.

—For a population equivalent to that of Canada, Julia replied, there were ten times fewer deaths in Malaysia.

—Do you think that ghost made a difference? Luc joked.

Julia giggled nervously, scratched her head and replied:

—Obviously not, my love, but I find the news story funny. We’ve got to have a good laugh when we can, because there is nothing funny in seeing a possible epidemic resurface...

—What? Do you really think the story might be grounded on reality? And why on earth are you interested in Malaysia today, five years later?

—You know coronavirus was never totally gone, Julia said. I had a chat with our manager, Frank Nolan, on Friday afternoon. He said a new strain of coronavirus may have emerged in Malaysia. A completely different strain from those that prevailed in 2002, during SARS, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, and in 2012 during MERS, the Middle East respiratory syndrome. It would also be distinct from the one that caused the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021.

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—And?

—Well, as a member of the molecular biology sector of the Laboratoire de santé publique du Québec, it seems that I have been assigned to go there with a team of experts to find out if they were natural mutations in virus sequencing. According to the information available to our laboratory, a few points need to be cleared up.

—And why you, sweetheart? How am I going to manage on my own with our baby? She's only four years old, I'll remind you.

—Frank says I need to take the trip as I'm the most qualified. At least he doesn't seem inclined to go himself. Usually though, he doesn't miss an opportunity to take all the credit. As you can imagine, I refused straight away. I don't think I'm the best person to track down people who may have tampered with a virus. For one thing, I have maintained all along, during all the epidemics and pandemics caused by coronaviruses, that there was no scientific evidence that the virus was created or rigged in a laboratory. It's nothing but the old conspiracy theory that rears its head again! Besides, I can't leave you alone with Marjorie. She needs me, and you need me too. Moreover, with the Sylvestre case, I know you are quite tied up at work, at the Malone law firm.

—So that's perfect, Luc said. They'll just have to find someone else. I wouldn't want you to be kidnapped by the weirdo who roams around at night...

—Thank you for worrying about me! How kindhearted, sweetheart, I imagine that my being accompanied by a few male colleagues, if I ever accepted to leave, of course, has nothing to do with it?

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Luc nervously drummed his fingers on the kitchen table. The comforting smells of breakfast still emanated from the dining room. He straightened up, pushed his cup of coffee aside and approached to kiss Julia to convince her of his noble thoughts. At the same time, they could hear somebody moving in the next room as well as Marjorie's little voice:

—Hey, I'm awake! I'm hungry, Mom!

—Hello, sweetie, I'm coming at once! Don't move, her mother said, shooing Luc aside with a careless brush of her hand to tease him.

She added, all smiles:

—I'm not done with you! So, mister doesn't want me to go to work with other men in a far-off country. Is there a hint of jealousy or am I just dreaming?

She didn't give him time to answer, rushed over to her daughter's room and continued in a honeyed and suggestive tone:

—We will talk about it very soon, Maître Brousseau, won't we?

—Excellent, Luc replied, winking slightly at his wife.

He came up to her to steal a kiss from her before heading to his upstairs den. Julia about to receive the stolen kiss stopped him in his tracks and said in jest:

—I don't like jealous people. You will have to make amends...

—Maybe this afternoon, when Marjorie is taking a nap, he said, pointing to their bedroom.

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The weekend had been very pleasant for Julia and Luc. Their closeness, at all levels, was increasing by the day. In addition, little Marjorie gave them so much joy. Developmentally, she was a problem-

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free child. She slept through the night from the age of three months. She had cut her first two teeth, the lower incisors, at the age of five months, without showing too many symptoms. She had just whimpered a little more than usual, but not much of a bother really. She could speak understandable words at seven or eight months, and her motor development had been just as favorable. She could walk when she was ten months old. Julia and Luc were therefore not prepared to face the illness of their little treasure.

Yet a year earlier, one fine morning, Marjorie had woken up with an unexplained scorching fever and no other noticeable symptoms. Luc was not at home. He had left for two days for a trial in Montreal. Julia had to go to the hospital, since she couldn't get the child's temperature down. The test results showed a severe urinary tract infection secondary to a stricture of the right ureter. An unsuspected congenital malformation. This obstruction to the flow of urine caused an increase in pressure inside the right kidney and could have damaged it. It was therefore necessary to operate, because things could deteriorate. No parent likes to see their child in pain. But little Marjorie had been brave and stellar ~~from~~ through it all. Children often recover in a spectacular way. It was Luc and Julia who ultimately found the whole thing hard to bear. Then the routine slowly resumed its course inside the family's beautiful white house.

Julia's only regret was that her mother, Carolann, who died a few years before Marjorie was born, had not known her granddaughter. She would have been so proud. Julia had kept, for later, all the albums and

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flash drives with her mother's travel photos to show them to Marjorie one day. Carolann's eventful and busy life was one that Marjorie should know about. Julia had inherited her mother's sterling qualities: determination, courage and resilience. But how could she talk to Marjorie about her grandmother, without necessarily telling her everything?

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Upon her return to the laboratory on Monday morning, Julia was summoned to an extraordinary meeting at ten o'clock in the director's office.

—Hello everyone, Director Nolan said. Things are moving very quickly right now with the Malaysia Genome Institute in Kuala Lumpur, MGI. As you know, three days in microbiology can mean eternity. Since Friday, when rumors started circulating about a worrying strain of coronavirus identified in this laboratory, certain elements seem to have cropped up. American and Swedish researchers are said to have analyzed the genome of the new virus and detected abnormal vectors within the genomic sequencing. This would testify to probable human manipulations of the virus. The WHO, the World Health Organization, is therefore now asking members from independent laboratories and other nationalities to go and verify these allegations, and inspect the facilities of this P3¹ laboratory from which the mutant or manipulated strain is said

1

A P3 laboratory is a confined laboratory in which class 3 pathogens are analyzed, i.e. microorganisms that can cause serious illness in humans but for which there is normally a prophylaxis or effective treatment (e.g. tuberculosis, dengue fever,

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to have originated.

—Do we know why this new strain of coronavirus ended up in this P3 laboratory, and not in a P4² laboratory, like in China for example? asked Julia.

—Excellent question, Julia. According to the American authorities, some ill-intentioned character may have infiltrated the MGI of Kuala Lumpur to tamper with the genome of SARS-Cov-2, which was responsible, as you know, for COVID-19 in 2019, 2020 and 2021. Their goal was to turn it into an even more lethal strain. As I told you on Friday, I would like you to manage a team that we are going to send there at the request of the WHO. Ottawa's funding was quick. Your colleagues and friends, Jean-Marc Sévigny, an excellent virologist, and Grégory Shang, a biotechnologist, will accompany you.

Director Nolan's confident tone of voice left little room for discussion. Julia straightened up slightly in her chair and stuck out her chest, taking a deep breath as if to start a confrontation. She raised her voice in spite of herself.

—But sir, when you spoke to me briefly about it on Friday, I explained to you that my family situation did not allow me to work far away from home at the moment.

certain hemorrhagic fever viruses ...). Scientists work there in protective clothing similar to that used in nuclear power plants. Access to this type of laboratory is regulated, reserved for trained and authorized personnel.

²

Laboratories likely to harbor class 4 pathogens. These agents are characterized by their high level of danger (very high mortality rate in the event of infection), the absence of a protective vaccine, the absence of effective medical treatment, and transmission possible by aerosols. Maximum protection is required to handle these germs.

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Frank Nolan cleared his throat and assumed his most solemn tone:

—Julia, I don't think you understand the urgency of the situation. Your doctoral dissertation in coronavirus sequencing gives you a head start in determining whether the genome has been tampered with or whether it is natural evolution. You are the most qualified!

Instead of feeling flattered, Julia felt more like she was trapped.

—Sir, with all due respect, you are a hundred times more experienced at doing this job and your reputation is well established.

He didn't waver and looked her straight in the eye as if they were alone in the room.

—Julia, talk it over with your colleagues. I'll leave you until this afternoon to give me your answer.

Then Julia had seen the towering figure of Frank Nolan move away. He was in his mid-sixties, and yet he was straight as a ramrod and had a dark thick mop of hair, without a single white hair. She knew only too well that the delay he'd given her was only illusory. If she refused this mission, since it was well and truly a mission, she could say goodbye to her wish of becoming the director of the molecular biology sector of the Quebec public health laboratory. Otherwise, she knew that the position was quite within her reach. Indeed, everyone suspected that Director Nolan was due to retire in about six months and that she was going to be approached to succeed him.

Julia, Grégory and Jean-Marc met a little later in the dining room of the institute. Grégory stared at her with his eyes dark as soot. Even though he was born in Quebec, he was conspicuously of Asian origin. A

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flat face, large, slightly slanted eyes and a nose broader at the level of the nostrils. Jean-Marc, for his part, did not convey anything other than the true Caucasian phenotype³. Tall and thin, red-blonde hair, showing incipient baldness on both sides of his forehead. He seemed nervous.

—Julia, we really need you, Jean-Marc said. I doubt any other specialist can do all the necessary checks on the genome of this coronavirus better than you. You are the best at it. Frank is right!

—Come on, Jean-Marc! I thank you for your trust, but I don't understand why the director doesn't go himself. He has a lot more experience than me and he is recognized internationally. Besides, have you thought about my family? Marjorie is only four years old and Luc works like crazy!

—Listen, Julia, we all have families. Do you remember what happened with COVID-19? This new virus, to which no one had immunity, wreaked havoc across the planet and claimed at least five million people. Besides, official figures most likely never reflected reality. And it was a natural infectious agent. Can you imagine what damage a genetically modified virus could do! You must come with us!

Julia took a step forward towards her two colleagues who found themselves practically leaning against the vending machines.

—It is out of the question! she replied icily. I cannot leave my family. And you realize what a mess we'll be in if it really is a willful manipulation.

—Talk to Doctor Bergeron, will you? Grégory said, stepping in. He knows you better than anyone else. He will be able to advise you. I'm

3

All the observable traits of a living being determined by its genotype (its genes)

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up for it, in any case, as is Jean-Marc. Do we really have a choice? I consider it a humanitarian mission.

∞

Julia called her husband to update him on the latest developments. Sitting behind his large, red-brown lacquered wood desk, Luc heard “Shooting star”, which he’d set as his wife Julia’s ring tone. It let him know she was trying to reach him, without even having to look at his smartwatch or phone, and instantly put him in a favorable mood. All other calls deserved no better in his eyes, or his ears, than a classic indistinct “Xylophone” ringing. When he heard the characteristic ringing, he immediately took the call and went hands-free:

—Hello, honey, are you okay?

—Yes, thank you, sweetheart! Luc, regarding the situation in Malaysia that I told you about, as I feared, I find myself cornered. If I refuse, I can say goodbye to the lab management. And even worse, there could really be a danger for entire populations...

Luc had paused before replying:

—Listen, sweetie, I understand; and if it’s better for your career or for the fate of mankind ... go for it! We will manage. I’m going to ask my mother to come and look after our darling during the week. She will be delighted. And Marjorie shouldn’t hold it against you when she’s twenty, he joked.

—Thank you, sweetie, but that’s not funny. Marjorie needs me so much right now. I don’t know... Sorry, I need to leave you. I have a call on the other line... Yes, hello!

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—Doctor Bergeron? Hello. How are you?

Julia listened to what her former boss had to say to her. Obviously, Jean-Marc had contacted him to explain the situation ~~to him~~. Doctor Bergeron was a born motivator. A true mentor for a great deal of medical students. His residents adored him. Julia was no exception.

—I understand, Doctor Bergeron. It is indeed an extraordinary opportunity to advance science. Yes, this is believed to be the first human-engineered coronavirus, at least to our knowledge. But there are scientists far more qualified than me, you, for example, or Director Nolan.

Julia listened attentively to the voice of the man who had motivated her to become first a microbiologist-infectious disease specialist, then a virologist, and who had been her doctoral thesis supervisor on coronavirus sequencing.

—I know. You are right. My mother would have urged me to do it. You knew her well. Okay, I'll think about it, and thank you for your encouragement. Goodbye doctor, and see you soon!

Julia had unfortunately known her biological mother quite late. Oddly enough, a doctor too, the latter had devoted her life to researching oncolytic viruses, those which save people by attacking cancer cells. Julia now had to fight against viruses that destroy lives...

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That same afternoon, after a lot of dithering, Julia had finally accepted the mandate of her director and met her two colleagues again to develop a plan of action and share the preliminary information. A strange

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foreboding had come over her without her really knowing why. But her conscience now told her to accept. She wondered inwardly, without wanting to worry her two colleagues or her husband, under what conditions this research would unfold.

2.

On arriving in Kuala Lumpur five days later, totally exhausted, Jean-Marc, Grégory and Julia were greeted at the airport by a man of Asian descent, practically bald, wearing a perfectly tailored gray suit and holding a laminated poster with their names printed on it. Not a mere scrap of paper, with illegible scrawls made with a red marker. After customs clearance and baggage claim, the man, who happened to be the driver of a long black limousine, brought them from the airport directly to the research facility. They were to be welcomed there by the director of the Malaysia Genome Institute, Dr. Azizul Awang, a distinguished biogeneticist, microbiologist and immunologist. Was he a hundred years old to have accumulated so many titles? Julia thought. How impressive! Who cares if we're tired, it looks as if we are not going to stop at the hotel right away.

Director Awang was a man of about fifty, with round eyes and almost black irises. He was at most five feet two tall. Dark hair, very

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short, slightly graying in places. He seemed lost in his visibly waterproof white tracksuit. He had kept his overshoes. His open look testified to his determination and his self-confidence. All technicians and staff consistently bowed as they passed.

After a well-deserved lunch, they were given a little rest in a special room, adequately furnished with comfortable midnight blue armchairs fitted with headphones that perfectly muffled outside noises and broadcast particularly soft and pleasant sounds.

They had all slept exactly the same amount of time. One hour to the minute. Curious. Dr. Awang explained to them that these were relaxation stations which allowed employees and researchers to recharge their mental energy after long periods of peak concentration.

—Wouldn't the device use binaural beat technology? Grégory asked.

—By all means, Doctor Awang replied. Do you know what it is?

—It seems to me that their use remains controversial, Grégory added.

—And what is it? Julia asked.

It was Grégory himself who retorted in a didactic tone:

—When two slightly different sound frequencies are played in each ear, the brain perceives them as a fixed beat or frequency. This is called a binaural beat. The sound frequency perceived by the brain is the difference between the two frequencies presented to each ear. For example, you get a binaural beat of 10 Hz by playing a frequency of

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210 Hz in one ear and a frequency of 200 Hz in the other. The benefits of binaural beats would be felt because the brain then synchronizes its neural activity and alters its own brain waves. Certain frequencies are thought to improve various cognitive functions, but everything remains to be proven to this day. Isn't that right, Doctor Awang?

The scientist nodded, puffed up with pride:

—We introduced this technology here two years ago. And the results are remarkable. A lower absentee rate and also fewer lapses in concentration likely to cause biological accidents which may prove very costly and dangerous. For our organization, binaural beat stations help our employees unwind and make them more efficient in ten times less time than “standard” moments of relaxation or vacations.

—In any case, as far as I am concerned, I found this relaxation session wonderful, Julia stated. I feel great whereas jet lag usually kills me.

—Same for me, Jean-Marc piped in.

—Ditto, I have to admit, Grégory said. Impressive in all respects!

—Good, I'm very happy, Dr. Awang concluded. We will now head to the disinfection station so that you can access to the laboratory. I will also introduce you to some researchers of other nationalities who are already there at the request of the WHO, in particular a Swedish couple, two Americans and two Germans. A team of Chinese experts is also about to land.

Based on the security measures implemented to gain access to the laboratory, Julia, Jean-Marc and Grégory expected they were in a level 4 laboratory. After each of them had obtained their accreditation, to enter it, they had to first take a shower. Then, in an atmosphere worthy of

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science fiction movies, they took turns entering a room eight feet high, six feet wide, and just as deep. This station detected human presence, took temperature and heart rate. It sent an odorless, nontoxic disinfectant for thirty seconds. If the person was feverish, the doors to the next room, a dressing room, remained closed. Access to the other steps was refused. The aim was to avoid contamination of the laboratory by external agents. It may seem strange, but an infectious disease and virology laboratory must be a sterile environment.

The three Canadians had been allowed to move on to the other levels. In order to get into the hot area, you then had to put on a positive pressure suit so that if the suit accidentally tore, the air would come out, rather than go in. The protective garment was connected to one of the outlets, supplying air whose renewal was completely independent of the laboratory atmosphere.

Julia entered first, followed by Grégory and Jean-Marc. The laboratory was huge. After several minutes of disinfecting himself and changing his personal protective equipment, Dr. Awang joined them inside to guide them to the microorganism assessment sites. He introduced them to some technicians and biologists and gave them a tour of the different hot zones. Tomorrow, they would be able to start their analysis.

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On coming out of the lab, they had to take another shower, in

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phenol this time, in their spacesuits. Cameras continuously monitored laboratory activity; staff never came inside alone. Another person authorized to enter zone P3 also had to be in the central security post; that way he or she could thus intervene in the hot areas in case a problem occurred, such as someone having a dizzy spell or any other such incident.

—Tomorrow, as you probably know, Doctor Awang said, you will have to work in pairs, that is to say that each person of a working couple must constantly monitor the actions of the other to avoid bacteriological accidents that might occur as a result of distraction, tiredness, etc. Since there are three of you, one of you will be paired with another teammate, otherwise you will enter the lab two by two only.

The trio had not thought of this significant inconvenience, nor did manager Nolan, obviously. Doctor Azizul Awang continued:

—I will take you back to the main common room where you can also have meals, have access to computers, charging stations, etc. If I can, I will introduce you to some of the best researchers who are already there. You will certainly be able to meet interesting people.

They were starting to feel tired again. Julia really wanted to go and rest at the hotel. A good night's sleep would do her a world of good. It was five o'clock, local time and only 5 o'clock in the morning in Quebec. She felt like she had literally traveled back in time and wasted a day of her life. Thirty hours of flight time, twelve hours of jet lag, plus the need for a high level of concentration since they had arrived—she was utterly

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exhausted.

—Doctor Awang, I think I need to go to bed. I am going blank.

—Doctor Demers, Julia, is that it? In my opinion, you should come with your colleagues, you'll meet a few people that you will be working with in the next few days. Have a good meal and go to bed early, yes, but not at six o'clock. It would be the worst mistake.

—You may be right, doctor. I am terribly susceptible to jet lag. It must be hereditary... She had a passing thought of her mother. Okay, I'll come along with you, but no more than an hour.

Grégory placed a hand on her shoulder as a sign of comfort and said to reassure her:

—We'll go back to the hotel together, Julia. We made the trip together; we will stay with you. Your husband wouldn't be happy to hear that we abandoned you in a town of this size.

Julia smiled at him.

—He knows I'm a big enough girl to get in a cab and go back to the hotel on my own. But I thank you for worrying about my safety.

She felt privileged to have colleagues who were such pleasant company. It wasn't always the case. There were big egos in this domain. The female doctors of her mother's generation had had to fight to carve out a niche for themselves and be respected, especially in certain specialties, in surgery, among others. Of course, as in many countries in the world, medicine in Quebec had become predominantly female now. And personally, Julia had never experienced these issues.

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Honestly, Julia hadn't regretted staying with her two colleagues and friends. The three Canadian scientists had met with experts from all over the world and the encounters had been most enriching. First, there was this funny duo formed by the Swedish couple, Margaret and Axel Sandberg. She, a renowned virologist, the very picture of the Scandinavian physique: tall and slender, medium-length blonde hair. He, a highly qualified bioinformatician, who analyzes molecular data to dissect and study DNA and RNA. Julia would have associated him much more with "celebrity" magazines than with scientific research. She had never met such a fashionable scientist: tall and strong, beautifully styled brown hair, short on the side and longer on the top of his head, with a wavy and slightly slicked back shock of hair, and a well-trimmed four-day-old beard. It was so well-trimmed in fact, that Julia felt a little uncomfortable and avoided looking straight at it. They had been there for two days. They hadn't found anything out of the ordinary so far. Malaysia's coronavirus was virtually identical to that of COVID-19.

Grégory, for his part, was impressed by a gorgeous German woman, red-headed, green-eyed, fair-skinned and of remarkable height. Her colleague, on the other hand, was also imposing, an utterly bald man, about six feet tall. He wore very original glasses. "Mykita" in acetate, he had said, when Jean-Marc asked him about them. It must be said that Jean-Marc and his boyfriend, Louis, are downright fashionable men. The German guy, probably gay as well, asked, addressing Jean-Marc:

—Do you like this model?

—The geometric and architectural frame and the strong blue color

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really remind me of the Bauhaus.

—You are quite right, dear friend. Not to mention the unique, retro-futuristic, metal design that plays on finesse.

Much ado about nothing, Julia thought. We are quite far from the topic of virology and molecular biology. I should have gone to bed.

The introductions were not long in coming.

—Jean-Marc Sévigny. I am a virologist. Here are my colleagues: Julia Demers, a microbiologist-infectious disease specialist and virologist; and Grégory Shang, a biotechnologist. We are Canadians.

—Good evening, gentlemen, lady. I am Oleg Schmidt and this is my colleague, Hilda Bach. Are you also working on coronavirus? the German mastodon asked.

—Yes, that is why we've been summoned, Grégory answered, to break the spell between these two a little. We need to take a close look at the sequencing to see if anything is wrong. What about you, what is the reason for your presence here?

—We have been working here for two days, with similar goals, and so far, we have found out nothing out of the ordinary in the genome. At least, nothing that wouldn't be natural. However, according to our initial analysis, this coronavirus could be even more contagious and with a higher death rate than SARS-COV 2, which caused COVID-19 five years ago.

Two very young scientists, obviously Asian, came out of the binaural beats station. They must be the two Chinese doctors and they were also entitled to the relaxation session. China and Malaysia are in the same time zone ... so where else might they have arrived from?

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The meal service started at seven o'clock was frankly excellent. Julia couldn't believe that a scientific institute could prepare such sophisticated dishes, particularly in the evening, when most researchers had already left the premises. Professor Awang had explained to his guests that the work was going on around the clock. In addition, to avoid contamination from the outside, laboratory officials favored meals taken there, as well as certain entertainment, in addition, of course, to the binaural beats station.

—We understand that we must limit contact with the outside world, beautiful Hilda added. In Germany, we work on a small island in the Baltic which is home to the world's oldest virus research center. The Friedrich-Loeffler Institute. It has been located on the island of Riems since October 10, 1910. It occupies two thirds of the surface there: thirty hectares, surrounded by reeds, protected by iron gates and surmounted by barbed wire.

—I see, we also observe this level of security in Quebec, Julia lied so as not to lose face.

—Obviously, her colleague, Jean-Marc, added. As in all P4 laboratories, you only enter if you are really invited!

—Absolutely, the German girl replied. In fact, before a bridge was built in 1971, a cable car had to be used to reach the island. Everyone, from researchers to guinea pigs, went by cable.

—And what are your facilities on this island? asked one of the two Chinese scientists who had just joined the conversation.

The gorgeous German female scientist added, in a ceremonial and proud tone:

—Two state-of-the-art buildings house sophisticated laboratories

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and watertight barns for animal testing. On the island, around twenty species are housed: farm animals—cows, pigs, sheep, goats or poultry—but also mice, rats, guinea pigs ... fishes, mussels, crabs, bats and insects. Among the four hundred and fifty employees of the Institute, two hundred researchers work on the island of Riems. But not more than ten scientists have access to category 4 pathogens, such as the Ebola, Hendra and Nipah viruses, Lassa fever or even rabies, African swine fever or Crimean-Congo fever. In total, the island is home to several hundred high-risk strains.

The two young Chinese doctors looked at each other for a fraction of a second, pretending to be casual and unconcerned. The second asked the German female scientist in English, with his characteristic Asian accent:

—And who is the director of this sophisticated laboratory?

—I am, the scientist added with a question mark in her eyes.

She had just realized that maybe she had been too forward in revealing that much information to these strangers.