

## The 13th Tribe

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## The Accidental Search

If it hadn't happened by chance, he would have probably not submitted the Google query that started it all — at least not without going to some pains to mask his purpose. Not that he felt more paranoid about googling things than the next guy, but ever since Google's AI began publishing scientific papers under its own name, he decided that prudence was of the essence: as a humanist, he felt that it would be indescribably more annoying to be scooped by a bot, a keiretsu-owned one at that, than by a human.

Holding back from going the whole hog on Google Scholar had become more difficult after Google revealed a beta version of its quantum oracle, which could supposedly search an exponential number of universes counterfactually related to the one in which the search originated (motto: "The world is not enough"). As a computational historian, he felt like a fox in a chicken coop that half-expects to run, on his way out, into the farmer with the shotgun.

One morning in late May, with the classes over for the term, an online chat request from a friend at Tel Aviv University interrupted him while he was contemplating a multiverse treasure hunt. Absent-mindedly cycling between the chat and an open Quoracle window, he found himself staring at a line of gibberish in the query field: he forgot to switch the virtual keyboard from Hebrew back to English. Why not, he thought. The result, which came back after a couple of minutes, gave him a pause. He told his friend that he would get back to him later, got himself a large coffee, closed the door, and sat down to read.

## The Scroll

What he took to calling "the scroll" — in reality, merely an executive summary generated automatically from a smattering of qubits spread over uncounted universes — was quite stunning. It included a map of sorts, along with directions for reaching a particular point marked on the map. The Quoracle has obligingly annotated the star charts, which looked like they were drawn by hand, with GPS coordinates. There were also landmark sketches, traced in ink, of what the place in question looked on approach. These reminded him of the illustrations in Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*, not the least because the coordinates placed the point squarely in the middle of the great desert of Sinai.

He kept the scroll secret and he kept it safe, until seven months later an opportunity presented itself: an invitation to deliver a series of lectures in Tel Aviv. This would place him on the wrong side of the border, but going via Egypt would have made the excursion too conspicuous. His familiarity with the desert and his old army training would have to do. He crammed a second suitcase with hiking gear and told his wife that he would spend a week after the lectures camping out in the Negev.

## The Secret Canyon

The place was marked by a cairn in the center of a broad crossroads — a geologically rather improbable intersection of three canyons, including the one down which he came. The cairn sat in a small space cleared of boulders and looked like all the other cairns found along desert tracks. He was pretty confident this was the place, though: the two visible peaks and the jagged rim between them looked just like the sketches in the scroll.

As he advanced with some hesitation past the cairn, he became aware of another way that opened up on the left — a narrow passage leading into a vertical slot carved through the sandstone. Against the heat of the early afternoon, it looked cool and inviting. He accepted the invitation. The passage curved away in a manner that felt odd: seemingly at right angles simultaneously with the main canyon, with its tributaries converging onto the clearing, and after a while somehow also with itself.

He knew he was on the right track when, half an hour later, he glanced up and saw that all the jet contrails disappeared from the sky and the silence of the desert became absolute. In time, he came at an encampment: two camels, a tent, a few black goats in a pen. He called out and a woman came out of the tent. She wore a black woolen aba; on her feet were leather sandals. She regarded him for a few moments steadily and without surprise, then asked him if he would like a drink of water. She spoke Hebrew.

### **The Choice**

“Many years have passed since one like you last came out of the Maze. By our Choice and covenant, we are a hidden people. Yet, a wanderer, if he be wise and lucky, may find us. Those who do, we welcome, for a little while. To those who speak our tongue, we also tell of the Choice, for it may concern them closely, if they be of our blood.

“Know, then, that before my people were hidden, we left Mitsraim because we did not want to be slaves any more. The Prophet showed us the way. For many years we walked in the wilderness and it was hard. But the desert was also just, and peaceful, and it was beautiful, and ere we came to K’naan, the promised land, we loved our Sinai. When we crossed the River, and village after village burned, and corpses of men piled up, and the captains brought back in fetters new widows and orphans with eyes full of hate, the promise soured. It was then that we of the Thirteenth Tribe came together and resolved to leave. We slipped between Yehoshua’s sentries and escaped pursuit and won back to Sinai and disappeared from the world and hid from it forever, because we made our Choice: to be neither slaves nor slave-masters. I am Tsiya of the Bene Yeshimon.

### **The Return**

He lay on his back, pondering the Choice. The stars were coming out. It was going to be a clear and cold night — not unusual for the Sinai he had known in his youth. He pulled the sleeping bag up to his chin.

When he woke up in the pre-dawn chill, the goats, the camels, the tent, and the people were all gone. He reached his hands, palms outward, to the embers of the fire, which still held some warmth. Glancing up, he noticed a silver dot climbing into the pale sky above the eastern wall of the canyon. As the dot inched toward the zenith, it left behind a bright vapor trail that was soon overtaken and swallowed by a herd of cirrus clouds running swiftly before a rising east wind.