

Chapter 25

The heart of a man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

—*Proverbs 16:9*

Basque Provinces

Spain

April 10, 2025

“What do you think? Any idea why this guy was attacked?” The Spanish police officer took a hit off a water bottle.

“Can’t say,” Mark replied with a slow shake of the head, “but the poor guy’s clearly tormented.” Mark looked at Father Daniel through the two-way mirror of the interrogation room; the father was holding his head. A young investigating officer—Mark couldn’t remember his name—sat across the stainless-steel table; the tinted glass accentuated the coldness of the gray room. Looking at his reflection, the priest turned away in disgust.

“Father, we need to finish this. I know it’s not easy, but . . .” The voices from viewing room speakers were thin.

“How much does he know?” Mark asked.

“Not much; he doesn’t know about you or the Yard’s involvement if that’s what you

mean.”

“Does he know about the clones?”

“No. But he suspects something is amiss—he’s no dummy.”

Mark just nodded at this. “Hey Simpkins, has the DNA match been confirmed with the one at the hospital?” PC Simpkins handled the legwork.

“Yes, sir. All three match.” Simpkins handed him the file.

Mark compared the two side-by-side autopsy photos with the biometrics scan printout. It’s hard to accept these are clones, he thought. Could this be some ruse? He knew that numbers didn’t lie, but mathematicians certainly could. But who would fake DNA results, and for what purpose? DNA had been a confirmed match on all three. It was bizarre. A voice from the speaker snapped Mark out of his musings.

“Are you sure this was the same man you saw on Wednesday?”

Mark watched the priest’s reaction, unsure what he was looking for.

“I don’t know who he was. It’s like I told you: he attended the Mass.” The priest was obviously irritated. “Then he appeared in my office.”

“Was there anything he mentioned in the confessional that would identify his purpose?”

“No, nothing.”

“Look, I know you priests have some kind of sacred vow and all, but there’s been a death, and I have to investigate . . .”

“You mean murder.”

“There’s been no formal charge of murder.” The detective spoke kindly. “I’ve told you this. We know from the circumstances it was self-defense. Was there anything said in the confessional?”

“No, nothing.”

“There must have been someth—”

“I’ve told you he said nothing; he entered the confessional and said nothing of any relevance.”

Spanish captain turned away from the viewing room mirror. “What do you think, Captain Hendricks?”

“I think I’m going to put an end to this.”

Mark threw open the interrogation room door that slammed against the wall rattling a loose panel. Daniel barely moved, but the young detective jumped to his feet.

“Detective, this interview is over. Your captain needs to see you immediately.” Mark whipped out his ID.

The lieutenant looked over Mark’s Interpol ID and nodded. “Sure thing, Captain.”

After the lieutenant left, Mark took time to adjust his hair that looked like he’d just gotten out of bed. He rapped his knuckles on the mirror. “Kill the audio, Simkins, if you please.” He took the seat the lieutenant had just vacated. “First things first, Father. You did not kill anyone.”

Caught up in his own hell, Daniel didn’t respond.

“Father.” Mark shook Daniel until he held his eyes. “You didn’t kill anyone. It wasn’t human—well, not in any sense we can understand—it was just a human-looking animal.”

Daniel furrowed his brow in confusion.

“You know, a human cow. Sort of a . . .”

“How could this be? The man spoke to me, and I talked to him.” Daniel’s voice rose in anger. “What are you saying by calling him a cow? Is this some kind of poor joke?”

“Well, the man you . . . uh, interacted with, was a clone and a differentiated schizoid to

boot. Hey, you said it talked to you? That's unusual—what did it . . .”

“Who the hell are you? And what's this all about?”

“Look, my name is Captian Hendricks. I'm a homicide detective from Chicago on loan to Interpol under the grace of your Vatican to run down the people birthing these clones.” Mark set his ID on the table. “I found one in Chicago, and all hell broke loose. Here's the autopsy on your clone.” When the file hit the table, graphic pictures spilled out. “Also, the pics of your assailant and its match—one, John Asker—some Spaniard from Zaragoza they found dead in a ravine. Well, hey, both were found in a ravine. Isn't that odd? The other is a pic of the same John Asker, ah, not dead in a ravine.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Daniel spread the pictures.

“The third clone was also identified as John Asker.” Mark pointed at the photo documenting the more recent death. “This guy might be the legit. You can't really tell much from the photos—he's pretty banged up about the head and shoulders—the DNA makeup is an exact match, and the differences are clear.”

Daniel studied the nude autopsy pictures. In the one labeled *John Asker 4/12/25*, the body appeared slight and not muscularly developed. In the other photos, the musculature on the bodies was cut like those of a bantamweight. “You said he was from Zaragoza?” Color ran from his lips. “John Asker? From Zaragoza?”

“Yeah. Why? Do you know him?”

“How do you know which is the clone?”

“Well, they could *all* be clones. The donor would have to be at least twenty-some years older. The one on the left, we think, was born three to five years earlier.” Mark gave Daniel a concerned look. “I think that's enough for now. You look like you could use some rest.”

“These two here.” Daniel pointed at the autopsies. “Their navels are different.” He breathed deeply twice before grabbing his forehead.

“I know, let’s get.” Mark rose from his chair. “Hey, Simkins.” He rapped the mirror. “Let me out.”

The next afternoon, Mark and Simkins drove to the church. Exhausted, Mark took the time to pick up an icebreaker. After talking to a gardener, Simkins stayed back as Mark walked behind the church to Daniel’s outdoor exercise area. Wearing his spelunking suit, Daniel was doing a series of odd dance-like maneuvers.

“Good to see you again, Father.” Mark grinned, armed with coffee and pastries from town. “That’s an odd way to exercise.”

In his current pose, Daniel looked like a crumpled spider. Moving in and out of set fighting stances, he never lingered in any one position for more than the time it took to be fully set. Then shifting as quickly as possible to the next stance, he somehow maintained a perfect balance. “The weakest parts are around the joints.” His voice sounded distant. “In spelunking, the body joints are everything. Climbing through tight spaces requires each limb to be as agile and powerful as possible. It’s a tough balance to maintain.”

Mark was getting tired just watching him. “I used to run, Army and all that, unquestionably a good CV workout, I just found it tedious and too stressful on the joints.” Moving deeper into the sheltered space to get out of the wind, he waited for Daniel to finish. “This priest gig seems to fit you.” After Daniel toweled off, Mark offered coffee and pastries.

Daniel accepted only the coffee. “Yeah, lots of personal time. This flock does not care for too much tending. Little late in the day for breakfast, eh detective?” He nodded to the sun.

“I slept in,” Mark explained sheepishly. “Bit of jet lag, I guess.”

“Why are you here?” Daniel met his gaze. “And who were those men that were with you at the police station? They didn’t look like police.”

“The one kid with the brown hair . . .” Mark motioned toward the car with his pastry. “He’s Simkins with Interpol UK. I don’t know the other two, but I agree: I don’t think they were police, and if so, they certainly weren’t field men. They had Interpol IDs, but I think they worked for your boss.” Mark liked Daniel already. The guy didn’t beat around the bush trying to flush out his quarry. They walked in silence for a few moments along the gravel drive toward the residence.

“My boss?” Daniel laughed, “You mean God? He, too, has a funny way of showing up when you least expect him. Where are the other men?”

“My guess is those other two stayed with the locals to clean up matters.” Mark was careful to let Daniel control the conversation as they continued in silence toward the residence.

Daniel stepped onto the porch and opened the screen door. “I would like to know your intentions, detective. Again, why are you here?”

Mark looked up at him. “I don’t have a warrant if that’s what you mean. As I explained, I was sent here by the Vatican—well, actually by Interpol—but at the Vatican’s request.”

“I don’t like this.” The screen door closed, signaling the end of the conversation.

“Look, Father—can I call you Daniel? The Father-thing is a bit much for me.”

Daniel paused in consideration before nodding. “Sure.”

“Look, Daniel, this is all very weird for me too. My life’s been uprooted, my partner’s been reassigned, and I’m somewhere in some back-ass country with no tech, talking to a priest of all people about clones. You’re just gonna have to take this one on faith.” In a poor imitation of John Belushi, Mark steepled his hands in mock prayer, raising one eyebrow.

Daniel laughed. “Come in, please, and forgive me for my doubts.”

“ . . . so, after we dug up the guy who had the matching DNA, we knew there was a possible connection between the deaths.” Mark wished he had a beer. For the past two hours, he had been bringing Daniel up to speed on the bizarre chain of events that had brought him here.

“That’s when you found out about the coin thing?”

“No, that was before.” Feeling the priest was more at ease, Mark roamed the small first floor as he spoke. The small galley kitchen, along with the L-shaped great room, reminded him of the first house he had rented in DeKalb during college.

Daniel reached up to turn on the light over his reading chair. “Kind of a stroke of luck, finding that coin specialist. Numismatics, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Mark laughed—his partner never had been able to pick up on its pronunciation. He wondered if Steve was okay and suddenly lost his sense of humor.

Daniel noted the change. “Problem, Detective?”

“This business is pretty serious. I don’t understand all of what’s happening here, but the coin professor talked some mumbo jumbo shi—stuff about the ‘end of days,’ and now I’m here and have to take some priest back to Rome.” Mark opened a pantry door next to the kitchen and was surprised to find it mostly barren.

“Back to Rome? What are you talking about?”

“After those two guys showed up at the station—I mean—after we left the interview room, I got a call from a Commander Nathen at Interpol UK. He said that both of us are to be in Rome tomorrow.” Mark paced to the window on the side porch.

“And . . .”

“That’s it. It’s back to Rome with you, and I’m to serve as your escort, so to speak.” He

opened a door in the kitchen that led to the laundry area.

“This is most unacceptable. I have responsibilities to my flock and no—”

Mark was laughing as he emerged from the laundry room.

“And what’s so funny, Detective Mark from Scotland Yard?”

“He said you’d make that argument. I’m supposed to tell you your first responsibility is to the church. I guess there’s more going on than we have been led to believe.” Mark opened a closet door before shrugging in resignation.

“Is there, um, something I can help you find, Detective?”

“Hey, uh, you Catholic types . . .” Mark made a tipping motion. “Don’t you? My partner did.”

“Sure, I was wondering what you were looking for.” Daniel laughed. “The local cider here is quite acceptable.” After retrieving a jug from a cold pantry set in the floor, he poured a wheat-colored liquid into a couple of mason jars.

Mark examined it like a fine wine before draining half of it in one throw. “Nice.” He took a seat.

Daniel smiled as he returned to his chair. “Maybe you should start from the beginning, detective.”

“Okay.” Mark looked up. “Back in Chi-town, we find this DNA-matching vagrant clone that was set up in this abandoned apartment, but it can’t communicate. It’s a walking catatonic, just like the clone from the Spanish hospital. Then, apparently, it kills itself. Only it can’t really kill itself ’cause it’s not aware, or in some kinda mental state—I don’t know—so maybe somebody else kills it.” Mark got up to pace. “Then it resurfaces, this time posing as some genetic scientist, who, after returning from an assignment to Canada, is a totally different person.

This guy interacts, and his colleagues say he never looked better. In fact, one woman remarked that he looked younger and healthier than she had ever seen him. After a couple of days, the guy kills himself in a fit of despair, leaving no suicide note, but takes the time to complete his projects at work as though nothing was wrong.” Mark stopped to ensure Daniel was still with him, but Daniel just shrugged, so Mark resumed pacing.

“Next, another clone miraculously appears on some crazy lady’s porch here in Spain. It’s another vagrant clone that doesn’t speak. Then we have the one that attacked you, and this one speaks. But it’s not the same one who first came to the confessional because that one was found dead in a ravine off a scenic lookout. Circumstances aside, what I don’t get is that all these cloned bodies are in their twenties, so this stuff was set up, like, twenty years ago.” He stopped pacing. “How come these clones are surfacing now, and again, for what purpose?”

Daniel shrugged again at the rhetorical.

Mark considered mentioning some religious implications for a moment, but it was shaky ground for him. “Next, we have some secret group with brutal tactics visiting Chicago. For some unknown nefarious purpose, they’re tied into this genetics Corp Hologenesis—that checked out as one hundred percent legit—thus leaving a dead-end. Except for this scientist guy, this Dr. Lewis, who we assumed was the donor. Now, these people randomly employ street thugs as muscle and use old Roman coins as payment. Two other major city police forces had some contact with the coin when we checked into it, but the trail disappeared again. The really odd part is we have a group of rough local mob boys that seem too scared to say anything.” Mark stopped to reconsider the ramifications.

Daniel misread the pause in the narrative. “What does that say to you?”

“Indirectly? The coin group is trouble, and they had to approach the local hoods to get

permission to operate on their turf. For secrecy's sake, these people are conscientious about avoiding confrontation, and they've been careful to leave any loose ends."

"You said the vagrant clone was set up in an apartment," Daniel probed. "By whom, and why would they do that? Why did the—what did you call it before, the legit? Why did the legit send it there?"

"I don't know. It's odd. We identified the clones by their physical condition. You picked up the belly button thing straight away, but that's not the only difference. This is to be kept quiet, but you have been cleared by Interpol as need-to-know."

Daniel balked at this. "Really? Why me?"

Mark laughed. "I don't know. They didn't tell me."

"One of life's little ironies, I guess." Daniel grinned.

"Indeed." Mark finished his jar, holding it out for a refill.

"Please continue, Detective." Daniel walked into the kitchen. "Your story is compelling."

"The autopsies on both clones revealed some biological peculiarities, the weirdest being a wire-framed bone structure."

"A what?"

"Did the attacker show any kind of unique physical capabilities?"

Daniel's eyes narrowed. "Yes, the man called Scarecrow tossed me about like a rag doll."

"Scarecrow?"

"Sorry. It's a nickname given by a woman in the church to the man you identified as Asker. The odd thing is that the attacker knew this nickname and addressed himself as such at communion. How he knew this name is a mystery. There's no way he could have known it."

"Someone could have said it to him, maybe Asker himself."

“Not a chance. The attacker was looking for Asker; he tried to bribe me. Besides, nobody would use that name outside the community. It’s a derogatory title, and Basque people are not that ill-mannered.” Daniel refilled Mark’s jar.

Mark could sense the priest was holding back, but he let it go. “Pretty creepy.” He walked toward the door to step out into the fading sunlight. “Bring that cider jug, and let’s hear all about this end-of-days stuff.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow at the sudden shift. “I’ll grab another jug.”

“Make it two, will ya? I m going to let Simkins know what’s up.”

At Daniel’s suggestion, Mark agreed to stay overnight, and Simkins would return to take them to the airport.

* * *

John Asker awoke on the hillside overlooking Father Daniel’s house. Awoke was not quite the word for the change in consciousness; it was more like a shift from one awareness to another. He knew the purpose of being there, to capture the priest, but he didn’t know the why. His memories of the priest were confusing. Since his last jump, things had been slipping. He knew everything that happened but not in a cohesive manner. It was like he’d been living in a dream where he could control some aspects but not others. He also felt compelled to do things he normally wouldn’t do—again, like being in a dream. He knew the priest was important and that Lord Tetius had ordered him to capture him, but he really didn’t know how to go about doing that. He heard someone swear in a familiar voice. Getting up from the long grass, he walked over to the hill’s edge overlooking a valley.

“We need to abort. The presence of the detective and those two local police boys will make capturing the priest messy.” It was one of Asker’s guards, the one that had beat him up two

days ago. John stopped when they noticed his approach. “Get down, you little fool.” Spat the large Australian sergeant, “you get us spotted, and I’ll thrash you.”

John bent down, continuing forward to the edge. Looking down, he spotted the priest sitting on a hillside with a stocky man. From the up-drafting of the wind, he could hear what they were saying.

“Get back,” The guard hissed, grabbing John by the arm. When he tried to pull John back, his hand lost its grip from John’s rock-solid stance.

From the surprised look on his face, John thought he saw a shadow of fear. “Don’t touch me again.” John heard himself say. He was now walking downslope towards the trail and heard the two men following.

“Where do you think you’re going, trooper Asker?”

“Back to camp.” John kept moving, “We need to report what we’ve discovered.”

“I don’t take orders from you.” The sergeant barked out uneasily. He hated being near clones and an aware one no less.

“You heard what that detective said just as well as I did: they are going to Rome to report what they know; Lord Tertius should be informed immediately.”

“Halt trooper, that’s an order.”

John turned and set himself. *You can beat the shit out of them both if you want.* The clairaudient voice surprised him. He figured it was Aziz, but the voice was clear. John looked down at his muscular frame—he felt strong, and it was a good feeling.

When the sergeant tried to shove John down, he barely moved. He saw the roundhouse punch in slow-motion. Blocking it easily, he lifted the sergeant off the ground, tossing him aside to meet the other guard who was drawing his night-stick. John caught his hand before he could

raise it. “I’ll only take so much of your abuse.” John wasn’t scared—in fact, he was excited.

“Sergeant, don’t . . .” The other guard spoke quietly, and before John could turn, he heard, more than felt, the blow off of his head followed by a rush of heat and weightlessness. He felt himself withdraw into a familiar fog where he watched himself kicking the shit out of both guardsmen. “Enough!” The shout came from the side of John’s perspective. The fight ended, and now John was standing over the two men, feeling a great power flow through him. His whole body seemed to tremble as the feeling dissipated.

“I told you, don’t touch me.” A cold voice stated.

The words were his, and they were not. It’s what he wanted to say but would not—someone else said them. Feelings of guilt quickly overcame him. He’d been beaten a lot in his life and had no wish to make others suffer as he had, and yet there were feelings of power he’d never known, and that scared him.

“I’ll see to it you get prison time for striking a superior, you little . . .”

“Watch your mouth, or you’ll get more of the same sergeant. The way I see it, we’re even for what you did before.”

The men’s bravado was still there, but John could see the fear on them like a yellow and red aura. *How can this be?*

“Do not be afraid,” his own clairaudient voice spoke to him, *“we are here to protect you. If you let us help, no harm can come to you.”*

“Who are you?” John asked in his mind.

“In time, you will know us.”

John’s mind ranged. Searching for answers, he found himself walking through the mist, where images of recent past events played out in different areas. Oddly, he saw himself in each

one. On the ride back, a different clairaudient voice sounded in his head. *We can help you with many things, John, as I've helped you all your life.*

"Aziz? How is it I can hear you now?"

"You know why."

"It's the new body, right?"

"In part, it's because you really believe. You have the faith, John, many suffer because they lack knowledge, and you can help them, John."

Drifting back into the mist, John suddenly remembered. *I know now why they want the priest.* "He won't cooperate."

"Remember, it was you who chose him."

"You attacked him, I tried to talk to him, but you attacked him."

The two house guards looked at each other. The clone was becoming more unstable. "I better call this in." The sergeant nervously stated as he glanced into the back seat. Satisfied it was still zip-tied, he was mesmerized by the clone's eyes. They were fully dilated, black with no color, and although it kept balance in the rocking truck, it seemed to be in a trance. "Corporal, step on it, will ya?" He said after tearing his eyes off the clone.

Asker was oblivious. *"It wasn't me, John. You must try to understand."* A clamoring of voices rose in the distance, and when the mist thinned, he saw partial shapes of discarnate people fighting and clawing at each other. The field was drenched in blood, and as giant birds swooped in to feed, the people were scattered by flowing winds until the scene was blotted out by thickening mist.

"What was that?"

"Come and see." And John saw images of ancient cities and long roads, all devoid of

life. A great Eagle formed out of the mist, and landing in front of him, it morphed into the battle standard of Rome. Then, a dark-skinned woman wearing a golden mesh dress appeared out of the mist.

“Your destiny is here; you serve my legions. If you are ready, many things will become possible for you. Aziz has spoken of your endurance and faith, and I am in need of such men like you.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Neith, of ancient Kush, and through the ages, I have been known by many names. You shall call me Minerva, for I am the goddess of knowledge and enlightenment. I can give you great wisdom and power to fulfill your purpose.”

“And what purpose is that?”

“To serve the legions that will unite the peoples of the world and bring peace.”

John hesitated at this. He'd heard promises of peace all his life, and the people making the promises were usually the first to want something from him. Also, because this place held no substance, he felt displaced, and the mist darkened, tumbling his mind as though cast adrift. Then his own voice spoke to him. *“Only you can decide.”*

When the men returned empty-handed from the priest's house, they were arrested and placed in holding cells to await public punishment. The Asker-gamma, pulled from the truck by four men, flew into a rage and had to be subdued. Once informed of the incident, Lord Tertius met Dr. Trios in the hall outside the detention area.

“As you're already aware, sire, this clone is losing its stability.” Trios was visibly frightened. “I think it would be a good test subject to try the psychotropic—”

“I have another purpose for it to fulfill.” The Leprechaun seemed unusually pleased. “Even a broken puppet still has its uses, doctor. I want a full workup on this clone. We may have found what we’ve been looking for.”

“I . . . I don’t understand, Lord.”

“That’s the best part, doctor. You don’t have to.” He laughed, “I want Wilhauser to take the lead on this.”

The Leprechaun entered the cell holding the Asker-gamma, and, as the Leprechaun expected, the clone was overly calm. “Trooper Asker, I can no longer tolerate these acts of disobedience. Either we reach an understanding, or I will be forced to take action.”

“You have no idea what you’re dealing with, little man.” The Asker-gamma growled.

“Then a demonstration should be arranged.” The Leprechaun laughed as he left the cell.

The clang of the prison door jarred John from a waking dream. After the beta jump, external access to his inner self had become elusive. John prided himself on emotional self-control, but nothing had prepared him to lose personal control. The anguish tempted him to take his own life, something he’d never seriously considered before.

Then, a new voice laughed in his head. “*You can’t even take a crap if I don’t allow it.*”

“Aziz?” All he heard in response was insidious laughter.

“*I am Scarcrow, and you are mine.*”

A low growl muffled sounds as contemptible mirth began to rise and fall like thunderous waves crashing upon his sanity. A sickly sweet smell of putrescence overcame him from which there was no escape; breathing through his mouth only made it worse. When he tried to focus, shattered shards of light filled his vision. Will eroding, he was losing control of his senses.

“*Stop it. Stop it, please.*” John concentrated on the mist and then thankfully slid out of

consciousness. The sensory bombardment abruptly ended.

“I can no longer help you out there.” A young man in a school uniform appeared out of the mist. *“Not like before.”*

“Aziz?” It must be Aziz. He’s just like I imagined.

“Yes, it’s me, John.”

“Why can’t you help?”

“Because the Scarecrow forbids it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you must not disobey him; he rules here.”

“I thought Minerva ruled here.”

As Aziz sadly shook his head, the mist flowed through him, breaking up his image. *“You must try to understand.”*

John was back on a plain of battle where ghastly images of people continually tore at each other. He was finally beginning to understand, and the mist faded.

John awoke with searing pain on the back of his left hand. He knew it was morning because the food tray had breakfast on it, so somehow, he’d missed the last twelve hours. He wasn’t tired; in fact, he felt renewed every time he returned from the place of the mist. Sitting up, he looked over his rudely scored hand, and clenching his fist, blood seeped around the freshly scabbed areas.

An electronic voice came over the speaker. “Prisoner A112, you will stand and face the wall.”

“What did you do to your hand?” A guard spoke from behind, “Get that medic in here.” Once the wound was cleaned, the shape of a goat’s head with exaggerated horns appeared.

“Trooper, how did you do this? I mean, what did you use?”

“I . . . I don’t know.” John calmly looked around the room. “Where am I?”