

## Chapter 24

*The world we see that seems so insane is the result of a belief system that is not working. To perceive the world differently, we must be willing to change our belief system, let the past slip away, expand our sense of now, and dissolve the fear in our minds.*

—William James

Legion of the Mountain Pony

Basque Mountains

April 8, 2025

As Jeff lay on the clay dust floor of the arena, he could barely feel his shield arm, but he could see plenty of stars. The downward blow from the pommel of the wooden short-sword had caught him on the cubital tunnel just above the elbow, compressing the nerve canal, which had caused his hand to go numb. He was no longer able to grip the handle on the back of his shield, and the next blow caught the edge of his shield, sending it about three feet away. His instructor followed up by smashing him with *his* shield. Then, after a single blow to the back of his hand sent his sword sailing, he was left wholly disarmed and vulnerable.

He stripped off his helmet and face shield. “Shit.”

“You have a natural skill with the sword, but not when it’s the only weapon at your disposal,” his instructor explained through an interpreter. “When you are turned, draw the elbow down like this, keeping the shield forward while you rotate it. Then turn with the force of the

blow, adding your power to it.” He mimicked the maneuver for him. “At this point, you will have the necessary balance to launch an effective counterattack.”

“Okay.” Jeff tiredly knocked the dust off his training tunic. The four hours of training were exhilarating, and he couldn’t remember having so much fun. Fighting with the polished teak wooden swords was dangerous. Although they couldn’t kill, they did leave nasty bruises where the protective vest and greaves offered no cover.

After a shower, Jeff looked at himself in the mirror. He was surprised at the tone of his body. He actually had a shape to his frame and had put on some weight. His arms and legs were a mess, though. At first, his opponents had rarely broken through his shield defenses in the mock sword fights. Last week’s lessons were on how to attack the limbs to wear down an opponent. No shields were allowed, so he hadn’t fared so well. From elbow to knee, wherever the protective gear didn’t cover, there was a solid mass of bruise. He was starting to wonder if the legion colors of yellow and purple were indicative of these badges.

“Nice work today, Sarge.” Guardsman Cooper prettied up in front of the sink bank. “Man, this is gonna hurt later.” He turned to look at a welt on his back. “I got that bastard, though.”

Earlier that morning, Cooper had won a grudge match with a guardsman from the Third. Infighting was strictly forbidden and punishable by up to fifty lashes, so grudge matches were set up to settle issues of honor. The belligerents would fight it out with sword and shield for three eight-minute rounds or until one was knocked to the ground. The guy from the Third—Cooper didn’t recall the name—had been mouthing off about Coop’s supposed sexual preferences. Coop had just smiled, set the challenge, and beat him solidly.

Coop was an excellent fighter, and Jeff was almost all defense, something the instructor was trying to change. Coop and Jeff were sparring mates and advancing high on the legion's rankings.

"Next week's another clone bout." Coop strode over to the lockers. "You going?"

"Nah, I got the duty," a tall Aussie Jeff hadn't seen before replied.

For the pride of the legion, the cohorts pitted their top-trained clones against each other. The clones were fierce fighters, with an intensity seldom matched by humans, but battle kata, or form, was beyond them. They could learn the attack combinations only so well, and their ability to react to the different attack styles was almost nonexistent. One guardsman related that teaching them was like programming a computer—they only did what was drilled into memory.

Jeff's cohort, the First, was dead last in the battle of the clones. In fact, they had yet to win an action, which proved an embarrassment for the supposed premier cohort of the legion. The rules of engagement were simple. One member of the cohort would be the "handler" of a clone team. He would be responsible for giving the audible commands to his team's combatants. Secondly, the clones were not allowed to kill—that was about it.

On the way back to his room, Jeff thought over the startling conversation he'd had two days ago with Dr. Matthew's team and the issues with clone jumps. Although Matthews had been called away, the candid discussion had revealed much about the Corvus organization and its cloning operations.

Jeff knew he had done nothing to deserve such trust. Either they were overly confident about their security level, or they were *so* powerful that any breach could be contained. Either way, Jeff was a gnat caught in a typhoon, and all he could do was ride it out. When he did earn

the trust of the Leprechaun, he would reap vengeance upon him—his brother’s torturer and killer.

Before the meeting, Jeff was apprised that six cloning facilities were scattered across the globe, producing at least ten batches of clone triplets. Each facility was tasked to increase the clone population. Since growing the clones was time-consuming and expensive, all jump trials were on hold due to constant failure. The Basque lab was now down to eighteen clones in training, and of the twelve dead, most were lost to failed jumps. During the meeting, Trios laid out the stats like a baseball team.

“Since the initial discovery of soul jumps,” Trios explained, “the results are mixed on the frequency of success. At first, we had less than a ten-percent success rate. These were performed mostly at the V Africana Legion, which sedated the alphas before euthanizing to reduce stress. However, since the first jump in Croatia occurred during a stressful accident, it had been theorized that the shock of a sudden death would prove more successful. Ten jumps were set up with the alphas staring death in the face, and the percentage of successful jumps climbed to fourteen percent. The best combination was an alpha, not sedated, and they jumped only partially insane.” Trios glanced up from his datapad. “Dr. Zuniga, would you care to elucidate on your findings?”

“While I was visiting the lab in Croatia, the lead doctor stressed the importance of Purkinje cell development.” Zuniga paused to acknowledge Jeff. “These are found in the cortex of the cerebellum. When the clones exit the growth beds, these cells are stunted, meaning little dendritic arborization—similar to a neonate, excuse me, a newborn. This is from a lack of diversified environmental input in the developing organism due to the controlled environment of

the tanks. However, when these stunted cells are found in a fully developed adult—like one of our clones—the resulting disorders are manifested as autism or advanced Alzheimer’s.

“I need to stress that the clones’ diminished mental state is only *like this*. They differ because there are no other physical symptoms other than a lack of balance. This is consistent with cerebellar cortical abiotrophy—a genetic disorder found in animals when the Purkinje cells die off. The stunted Purkinje cell disorder can also manifest itself in a lack of motor coordination, which is consistent with the state of the clones, post-lectus. Through training and environmental exposure, the dendrites of the Purkinje cells proliferate when exposed to a varied environment. In fact, the arborization found in the clones is amazingly fast.”

Jeff could only follow some of what he’d just heard. “You’re saying the problem is not a physical one. I mean, they do eventually become physically normal, don’t they? Then the problem may be that the mental state isn’t developing fast enough to keep up. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Well, it’s a bit more complicated, but yes, that’s the gist of it. It’s very likely that while the physical problems abate, the intellectual may take more time.”

Wilhauser added. “An example of this in humans is cerebellar hypoplasia, a rare genetic disorder in which the cerebellum is stunted or nonexistent. This also leads to motor control problems and intellectual disabilities similar to those exhibited by the post-lectus clones.”

“There’s that word again.” Jeff canted his head. “Post-lectus?”

“Yes, it’s Latin for bed—after they leave the growth beds.”

“Okay.” Jeff got back on track. “How can a human exist without a cerebellum?”

“Interestingly enough,” Dr. Hamilton took over, “the disorder was discovered in London entirely by accident in the early 1940s when a seventy-six-year-old man passed without next of

kin. The practice at that time allowed University to dissect him, and the autopsy revealed the subject was born without a cerebellum. Now, to reach that age in the relatively healthy condition he was found, we can assume that other parts of the nervous system compensated for this abnormality. This is the most perplexing aspect of the clones: there are no physical abnormalities. As already stated, their Purkinje cells are underdeveloped from a lack of physical stimuli commensurate with the rest of the developing brain.”

“Yes,” Wilhauser joined in. “It’s evident that something nonphysical is occurring here.”

“That’s your conjecture, Doctor,” Zuniga sighed, “not the opinion of the majority.”

“Slow down, gentlemen.” Jeff turned to Wilhauser. “You have something to add, Doctor.”

Jeff noticed Trios’s jaw visibly tighten. Wilhauser, on the other hand, appeared eager to share more. “When I was at III Fulminata’s lab, there was this one case where, under sedation, the clone awoke terrified. It seemed to be speaking to another entity before it suddenly passed out. We let it sleep for about six hours, and when it reawoke, it was babbling on about getting back on a train. We naturally thought it was a negative, but it didn’t behave like the other negatives. It seemed like it was revisiting a past memory. Then it started to have conversations with itself, calling itself Johnny.”

“I take it that was not his name,” Jeff connected.

“Correct. When I asked who Johnny was, it just sighed and smiled. It was most unusual. Would you like to read the transcripts?” He started to open his briefcase.

“Maybe later. Was it rational at some point?”

“Yes, about a day later. Although when we left it alone, it stopped its babbling and became quite serious.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Its entire attitude changed as though it had been putting on some kind of act.” Wilhauser pulled the transcripts out anyway. “Here, read this, and you’ll see my point.”

*I know what you want. Why do you need me?*

*(17-second pause.)*

*If you can do that, then what can I get?*

*(3-second pause.)*

*I know that already. You know they’re probably on to you. I might . . .*

*(9-second pause.)*

*Okay, no, I don’t . . .*

*(Loud rustling sounds, followed by what sounds like a cage being struck, then silence.)*

“Is that it?” Jeff asked.

“Yes, the following day, it seemed to be in its right mind. After a battery of response tests, we cycled it back into the legion for interactive observation.” Wilhauser paused to collect his thoughts. “It seemed to behave somewhat rationally, but over the next few days, its aptitude dropped off considerably. When written up for dereliction of duty, it argued that it was not its fault and Johnny was to blame. It was at this point we recognized the DID or dissociative identity disorder.”

“You don’t seem convinced of that,” Jeff spoke the obvious.

“Neither is Dr. Hamilton.” Wilhauser turned to Hamilton. “Right.”

“Yes,” Hamilton seemed nervous. “I don’t claim to have any wisdom in this area, but the personality aspects I’ve seen arise do not coincide with the prejump data.”

Jeff sat back. “Forgive me, doctor, but what are you saying?”

“Other personalities seemed to emerge in the clone I studied.”

“There are other facets to take into consideration here,” Trios cut in. “It could have just been playing you like in other cases, Dr. Hamilton.”

“Other cases?” Jeff asked.

“Yes, I have been documenting these.” Dr. Zuniga straightened up. “While we have been looking for a systemic answer to these problems, we took another route and began interviewing beta clones on their post-jump experiences. We concluded that the beta clones were lying—well, purposely falsifying testimony—during the interviews. They’d say one thing, and when cross-checked and pressed to elaborate, they contradicted themselves.”

“Lying? What could they possibly be protecting?”

“People usually lie or misrepresent facts to protect an action or something about themselves they don’t like,” Wilhauser elaborated. “In the latter case, it’s usually because their real-life would seem boring to others. In the case of the clones, they are actively obfuscating all attempts to get at the truth.”

“I don’t know if I would go that far.” Zuniga looked down. “What we know is that when cross-interviewed for clarification, so many discrepancies arose that it became obvious, they were purposely misrepresenting. This may be a by-product of DID, and they may not recognize truth from fantasy. I’m not sure. However, I do agree with Dr. Trios that this is a developmental issue, not some outside or secondary influence.”

Zuniga is obviously conflicted here. Jeff thought. On the other hand, Trios is the alpha-dog—I don’t like him. He turned to Wilhauser. “You have anything else to offer?”

“Yes. If it were just a developmental issue, then why are the clones not able to be

hypnotized?”

“What does that have to do with it?” Jeff was curious.

“I can field this one,” Zuniga offered. “When dealing with a false or misrepresented experiential recall, hypnotherapy can be a powerful tool in cognitive behavioral therapy. Help sort out fantasy from reality or to expose unknown motives. It doesn’t always work, but it can be beneficial in diagnosing what aspects a patient will most likely believe in. However, no patient can be hypnotized if they don’t want to be.”

“This is all true.” Wilhauser scooted forward to the edge of his chair. “However, DIDs have the highest hypnotic susceptibility of any clinical group. Yet, not a single one of the DID clones could be hypnotized. How would you explain that, Doctors?”

“Yes,” Hamilton seemed to liven up at this. “For a human’s primary persona to transfer into a clone, means the persona must be transmutable. If that is so, then why limit it to just one?”

Wilhauser looked at Trios. “Yes, doctor, why just some personae and not others. EH?”

Clearly uncomfortable, Zuniga shifted in his seat. “Let’s try and keep our civility here, Doctors.”

Wilhauser ignored him, continuing his attack. “And furthermore, if the persona did enter the clone shell and that shell was developmentally diminished, then we would see a diminishment of personality traits, and judging from the Asker-beta, there has been an enhancement, *not a diminishment*.” He rubbed his forehead. “I apologize for my rudeness, Dr. Trios.”

“Apology accepted,” Trios replied. “I don’t share your views, but I do respect them, Doctor. None of us would be here if we weren’t qualified.”

This was true. Corvus had recruited the best doctors it could find. Jeff, however, was not

one of them. Lord Tertius obviously feels I can help solve this problem, but this shit is well out of my league, and what in the hell did he mean by transmutable persona?

Visibly calming himself, Trios continued. “The data indicates that the cause of these . . . personality aberrations are normal reactions from a jump. Not some spiritual nonsense. It’s almost impossible to calculate the trauma on each person that has jumped. Also, we must take into consideration that almost ninety percent of the jump experiments fail. If spirits *were* somehow involved, then why the failures? Dr. Wilhauser, I value your expertise. If you wish to revisit this issue in this forum, please feel free to do so.”

Jeff thought Trios’s argument was sound. “Dr. Wilhauser, I’m told you were the first one to recognize the DID aspect in the clones, but something has changed your mind.”

“Yes, the tell was right there after a beta jump, but I missed it. After cross-referencing the data, I could no longer deny it. You see, it was arguing with itself.”

“Well, we all do that to a certain extent, Doctor,” Zuniga laughed.

“Yes, but defensively? It was using tactics against itself.” Wilhauser rubbed his forehead in obvious frustration. He leaned in. “Look, you ever try to play chess with yourself? You can’t use any tactics to defeat yourself because you, of course, are the one employing them. Obviously, you’re aware of this fact and therefore wouldn’t attempt it. It would be . . . well, ridiculous. But with a DID, they can pretend to offer alternative verbal tactics, but certain tendencies will always be manifest regardless of the level of sophistication the patient displays. It’s the same person with the same perspective, gentlemen. These things—the beta clones—literally use persuasive tactics as though they believe there could be some success in the argument instead of just playing out an alternative argument.” He sat back, rubbing his forehead. “Understand?”

“If I get you correctly,” Trios began, “if they were to show completely different tendencies to a given situation, then that would prove they’re—what? Of multiple personalities? We already agreed that they are most likely affected by DID.”

“No, no, no. Not just different tendencies in action but *opposing* tendencies. Two sets of wills diametrically opposed to each other—that was the aspect of the beta awaking. The beta clone did not want to continue its existence, but something else was arguing for it to do so. Did you even bother to read these?” Wilhauser waved the transcripts in the air. “It wasn’t giving any argument; it had made up its mind to die. It was as though another entity was trying to compel it not to.”

“All right.” Jeff rubbed his temple. “What happened to the beta clone?”

“It stabilized,” Wilhauser answered. “Then it died.”

“It killed itself as the others had,” Zuniga elucidated.

“No, this one was different.” Wilhauser frowned. “In the other beta clone cases, they either killed themselves by their own hand or wouldn’t protect themselves from mortal danger. This one apparently willed itself to die and took a week to do so.”

Jeff sat back. “If Dr. Wilhauser is correct and there’s another aspect going on, it could explain why all attempts to correct the DID have failed.”

Trios nodded. “And it might not. The main aspect is the underdeveloped neural fiber systems. This is obvious, and we *know* this as fact. We should be focusing on using psychotropics to stabilize them, and then we can focus on helping them develop. It’s the only tried and true way to deal with any mental disorder.”

“I concur,” Zuniga said. “There’s supporting case history that proves this procedure out—I mean, with normal people, uh, not clones.”

“Have you considered both?” Jeff asked. “Why not use drugs on the beta clones and then interview them; ask specific questions about what Dr. Wilhauser here is saying? Try using a truth serum on them.”

An uncomfortable silence overtook the room until Trios broke it. “Lord Tertius would not allow it.”

“Why?” Jeff noticed the deflation in the usually bombastic Trios. He seems scared.

Zuniga fidgeted. “He has ordered that there will be no application of any drugs whatsoever to beta clones—only stating that he has his reasons—and that’s good enough for me.”

Trios looked off into the distance. “We have been . . . less than successful in our treatments. Four doctors have already been removed for ill-planned experiments with the beta clones.” He shot a strange look over at Wilhauser. “As I understand it, Lord Tertius wants a more . . . *holistic approach*, when dealing with successive jumps.”

“I see your dilemma,” Jeff stated. “What we need are some cloned human lab rats. What about the insane clones, and can we use them?”

“No, they’re immediately destroyed because they’re difficult to work with, and . . .” Dr. Zuniga’s voice trailed off as he glanced at Trios.

Trios finished the thought. “They’re completely unreliable as a data source.”

Jeff noted a contradiction in Trios.

“Yes,” Hamilton interjected. “But even an insane person can represent reality as *they* see it. This is may not be a bad idea. If we can get one beta clone to at least be consistent during its interview, achieve some uniformity, we would at least have a stable platform to work from.”

Wilhauser looked hopeful. “Dr. Trios?”

“It’s possible, but it’s more likely a colossal waste of time.” Trios was hesitant. “Lord Tertius may allow the use of psychotropics to stabilize them before trials. I will back this idea and bring it to him. Hopefully, he will agree with the logic.” Worry lines appeared on Trios’s forehead. “He shouldn’t care too much, and it won’t affect the recycling.” He laughed nervously.

“Perhaps you should let me handle that,” Jeff offered.

The doctors turned in surprise to Jeff; it was obvious they hadn’t expected him to risk questioning a standing order.

The next day, Jeff passed the idea on to the Leprechaun. The little man smiled and told him that was what he’d been waiting for.

“Forgive me, sire,” Jeff blurted out. “Then why not just order it to be done?”

“That’s why I like you, Jeffery: bold when you think you’re in the right. But you have a lot to learn. You see, the idea must come from the people in the trenches, or they won’t believe in it. They must believe—only then will they do everything and anything to support that belief. When you command, command. When you lead, direct.” Lord Tertius looked at Jeff with his creepy “I own you” smile.

“Yes, my liege.” Jeff bowed, turning to leave.

“One last thing.”

“Sire?”

“What did you think of our Dr. Trios?”

Jeff carefully monitored his tone as he spoke. “He seems dedicated to the project, sire.”

“Hmm. . . dedicated. The Leprechaun looked up, “Yes, you may go.”

From his expression, Jeff knew he’d missed something big.