

## Chapter 28

*I am not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep; I am afraid of  
an army of sheep led by a lion.*

—*Alexander the Great*

Legion of the Mountain Pony

Basque Mountains

April 13, 2025

“You got any coin on this, Sarge?” Guardsman Morrissey slid over next to Jeff on the wooden bench. He had a large Coke in one hand and what looked like a pile of shit dribbled from Cheesehead with a severe case of dysentery.

Jeff figured that it must be a nacho plate. “No, I don’t know enough to bet,” Jeff replied, making room for the other guardsmen.

They were sitting in the underground arena, which had been built inside a natural cavern. The arena seated four thousand people and boasted food courts and bathrooms.

Guardsman Falco slid over. “Nah, but it’s the frickin’ Third Cohort. Since I’ve been here, I think those guys have won every time.”

“Yeah, but not today.” Guardsman Cooper slid in behind them. “I got two bills at two-to-one from that idiot Freddy, so I’m taking the Fifth head-to-head.”

“Hey, ain’t that the same guy you pasted in that grudge match the other day?” Guardsman Grant asked, taking a seat behind Jeff.

“Yeah, it’s him,” Falco grinned. “Boy’s got a penchant for losing. I bet a C as well. Got

three-to-one, but I went with the overall. I think the First's gonna take it in the singles."

"You're high," Guardsman Grant scoffed. "Andy ain't got a chance."

"We'll see."

"Rumor is he gives 'em somethin' other than them treats if they don't bite too hard,"

Coop quipped, and everyone laughed. "Yeah, boys, but I haven't seen him lose yet,"

"That true?" Jeff asked.

"Season's young, Sarge." Guardsman Visconti slapped Jeff on the back as he slid between them.

They quieted down as the announcer entered the center of the ring. Due to the contours of the cavern, he didn't need amplification. But he used it anyway since the crowd could get pretty raucous. The ceiling lighting used powerful LED bulbs that reflected indirectly off the cavern walls with stunning effect. When reflected off minerals in the rock, the cool light cast a multicolored hue like an ocean sunset. The intensity of the lighting was controlled by the noise of the crowd. The louder they were, the brighter the cavern became. It had a most dramatic influence on the battle clones.

"Our first heat is a three-on-three match." The announcer crowed the names of the handlers, their stats, the rules of engagement, and the particular cohort's record to date.

The combined fights were more about form than battle since the handlers often struggled to keep the clones in shield defense. The multi-clone engagements were set up like chess matches, with one side sporting white shields and the other black. The white team had the first command, with non-melee open play following. There was no armor other than leather vests and greaves in training, so pain served as a good motivation.

Most everyone waited to bet on the singles matches; that's where all the action was. In

the main event, a clone from Third was heavily favored, mostly because of trainer Freddy Perth, who managed to get the things dancing on a pin. Freddy's clone would be facing a bruiser clone from the First who had yet to be cycled. Corvus required all battle clones to be cycled throughout the cohorts for diversity training—and not the nice kind. An uncycled clone held an advantage by only working with one trainer.

The arena was full, and as the clones entered, the lighting rose in intensity as the crowd cheered. The shifting lights caused the First Cohort's clones to freak out and run into each other as though performing in some vaudeville routine. The crowd roared with laughter as flickers of luminescence scurried across the arena's dirt floor.

The First Cohort's handler circled and ordered them to form up. "*Sursum Faciunt.*" he screamed in Latin. "*Sursum Faciunt.*"

The clones of the Third were carrying black shields as they advanced to the center of the arena. They stopped and bent on one knee in a C-formation, shields locked. A good opening as some handlers will try to bull-rush in the confusion of flickering lights.

"Look at that bastard Freddy." Guardsman Visconti yelled in Jeff's ear. "I didn't see him give any command."

They were all on their feet now.

"Andy's got problems," Visconti added as one of the Third's clones separated and moved off to the left, leaving the other two still on one knee.

The First had finally grouped into a one-two attack formation. The idea was to charge, allowing the forward clone to take the defensive position head-on as the other two pushed with their shields. Once the shields met, the two rear clones would separate into a bullhorn attack, flanking both sides of the defense with an encircling maneuver.

“Yeah, let’s see if they can hold the attack,” Jeff shouted, but it was useless; the crowd was too loud for Visconti to hear him.

Anyone with sense would ignore the single clone and press for a three-on-two attack, but clones were not sentient. The First’s attack stalled in confusion as the lead clone veered toward the single clone that had split off and dropped to one knee. Then, the handler had screwed up by ordering the attack to continue. All three clones charged at the single clone.

“*Scutum Impetus A*,” Freddy countered.

The Third’s kneeling clone charged shield-first, crashing into the lead clone of the attack formation. “*Tumultuantem B!*” The other two clones dropped their shields and charged into the flanks of the First, striking decisive blows. It was over in less than three minutes—a new record.

“*Cessat actio.*” The announcer’s voice was barely heard over the roaring crowd.

The victorious clones were reluctant to stop but returned to their respective starting gates. The most dangerous part was that the losing clones, bruised and bloodied, sometimes retaliated by attacking the handler. Accidents did occasionally happen, but they were rare. If a fight got too carried away, an eight-man squad of Praetorian Guard, who wore armor and carried real swords and electric prods, were always at the ready to disperse the combatants.

“Next up in Battle Tribus,” the announcer proclaimed, “Ed Walker, leading the Second.”

The crowd continued to murmur at the lopsided victory.

“Tenner says the trainer Andy gets relieved.” Grant looked at Falco.

“I’ll take that bet.” Falco whipped out a ten-note Legion script. “Wasn’t his fault he was working with clones just cycled out of the Third.”

“No way. That’s illegal.” Cooper was just completing his training to be a handler. “Rules state there must be at least a three-handler gap.”

“He’s just bitchin’.” Grant matched the ten-spot, and they gave them to Visconti for safekeeping. “What do you think of that last bout, Sarge?”

“It was an impressive display of control and tactics by Freddy,” Jeff commented. “His maneuver allowed for multiple counter-responses.”

Grant added. “What would you have done?”

Jeff had been teaching tactics to Grant, who, along with others, had said that Jeff was the best tactical fighter in the cohort, if not the whole legion. Jeff wasn’t so sure. “Me? I would have gone for the three-on-two jugular, but with clones? Hard to say. Hows ’bout it, Coop? How would you react?” Jeff turned around accidentally put his hand in a dollop of nacho cheese. “Shit, Morrissey.”

Morrissey offered him a napkin.

Cooper laughed. “Yeah, a good way to deal with a feint is to ignore it. But that Freddy bastard’s a tricky one. So maybe a feint, maybe not. Me? I’d draw my clones into a safe shield box and advance to isolate the outrigger. Deal with him first. Then, with a man advantage, I’d wipe out the others.”

They nodded in unison and returned to the action, which included doubles and three-on-three matches, followed by a ten-minute break. In the opening singles match, Andy’s First was set against the Fourth, trained by Arnie Benson. Andy’s clone attacked with a flurry of three-two-three shield/sword combos. At the midpoint, the First’s clone used a shield-butt combo followed by a spin move, but the timing was unfortunate, and the Third won on a technical killing blow. After a five-minute recess, the title bout between the Third and the Second began.

Cooper retook his seat. “This ought to be good.”

“Hey, you missed Andy’s victory,” Grant said. “Got him on a TKB.”

“Luck blow? He was, like, getting his *ass kicked* when I left. It was seven-zip.”

“Yeah, the Third tried for a KB on a well-executed combo, but Andy had already ordered a feint-and-thrust. The Third’s clone missed the shield-butt opening, and when it turned on the spin move, Andy’s clone had already begun its thrust.”

“Ouch.”

“I thought the same, but the clone heeled and broke off the attack.”

“That speaks highly of the Second’s trainer,” Cooper interjected. “The clone didn’t lose it and go zerkers.”

“Zerkers?” Jeff hadn’t heard that one before.

“From berserker,” Grant explained. “Norse warriors would smear a narco-balm on their skin and fight with maniacal fury. It’s said they often attacked friend and foe alike, charging into battle naked and howling.”

“Yeah.” Cooper looked at Jeff. “Sometimes in the clone battles, a hard hit will provoke a clone to attack anything that moves, including the handlers. If it refuses the handler’s stop command, the Praetorian Guards come out and subdue it. Shit, one time they had to kill the frickin’ thing to stop it, but that’s extremely rare.”

“May I have your attention, please?” The announcement boomed across the arena.

The lights dimmed as the crowd fell silent.

“Prior to the next bout, there will be a punishment session. All personnel must be in attendance. Please return to your seats.”

A loud murmur arose from the spectators.

Visconti stood up and glared down at the rink. “What the hell is this? They’re not going to do floggings here, are they? This is bullshit.”

Floggings were a correctional measurement best kept between the men of the individual units. It was disgraceful for anybody not within the group to witness how someone handled the pain. Simply put, it was nobody else's business.

"I don't see a tree." Jeff squinted. "Can't be a flogging. That would be terribly counterproductive."

"Look!" Falco pointed. "Isn't that Andy?"

Grant searched the darkened ring. "Yeah, I think you're right."

"What the hell is this all about?" Morrissey asked as he sat down, handing Jeff a bratwurst with sauerkraut and onions. "Here's some mustard."

"Thanks." Jeff's eyes were glued to the ring, watching as Trooper Asker was led to the near ring gate.

Falco nudged Jeff. "Ain't that the guy that rabbited?"

"Yeah, his name is Asker."

"You know the guy?"

Jeff just shrugged. "Sort of."

Three clones formed up in the center of the arena. It was well known that doppelgängers protected each other and fought with greater intensity. Asker was leaning against the entry gate like watching some rodeo. When the clones split into a defensive convex semicircle, a pair of Praetorians shoved Asker into the arena.

"What the hell is this?" Jeff whispered to himself.

"*Maserefoth, Duo Uno Certamine!*" Andy's command for a two-one attack formation echoed across the suddenly silent arena.

The clones began the attack, then suddenly stopped. Andy repeated the command, but

they refused to advance.

Asker laughed, and taking two exaggerated steps toward them, he shouted. “*Recetui*” His voice reverberated in the cavern, causing the lights to flash, and the clones fled in terror. Mouth agape, the handler Andy stood in mute confusion before trying to control the clones. A Praetorian sergeant recovered quickly, and charging out, he smashed Asker’s head with the pommel of his sword. Meanwhile, Andy shouted a command to corral the clones, but instead of dropping to one knee, they took Andy down like a wounded ibex, tearing at him with tooth and nail. It was so silent in the stands Jeff could hear growling. The shocked Praetorian Guards finally charged in too late to save Andy. They had to kill the clones to stop their bloody attack. With his throat crushed and organs punctured by fractured ribs, Andy’s life bled out on the arena floor. In the eerie silence that followed, the Praetorian sergeant, bleeding from a bite on his arm, dragged trooper Asker from the area. After the clones were carted off, another three doppelgängers were ushered into the arena, led by a white-faced Freddy Perth. His voice cracked as he barked out his first command. The clones settled in a defensive open circle as two guardsmen, stripped to the waist and armed with real short swords, were shoved into the arena. There were no shields.

“Uh, guys, the dopps got steel,” Visconti spoke too quietly for anybody to hear him. It didn’t matter—everyone could see the light reflecting off steel swords.

Freddy’s next command couldn’t be heard above the rising din of the murmuring crowd, but what happened next was textbook. The three clones charged and then split into a two-one attack forcing the men to defend themselves from the two forward clones. As swords rang out in parried defense, the trailing clone swung low to the left, cutting one man across the thigh before spinning to attack the flank of the other man. The humans didn’t stand a chance, and the clones



hacked them apart.

Once sure of the outcome, Freddy shouted the command to heel as loud as possible. At first, the clones didn't respond. They continued to hack away at the partially dismembered bodies. Still, when the Praetorian Guards charged out, the clones stopped at once, and swords down, they retreated to their trainer, taking a knee in subjugation. Freddy breathed a sigh of relief so dramatically they could almost hear it from the top row, but nobody laughed.

"These men," the legion commander announced as he entered the rink with Praetorian Guards shielding him on both sides, "have failed to protect us." He paused in front of the bloody mess. "They had a duty to protect our interests, and through their neglect, they jeopardized everything we have worked so hard to pursue." He kicked one of the severed limbs out of his way. "This cannot be tolerated in the slightest degree." He strode to the center of the arena. "We are the Legion of the Pottok." He began the legion's anthem.

"We stand!" Some in the crowd yelled.

"We carry our burden."

More joined in. "We stand!"

"We carry our honor."

The crowd grew louder. "We fight!"

"To our enemy."

"We fight!" Louder still.

"We carry our scythe."

"We reap!" The crowd roared in unison.

"To our Lord."

"We reap!"

“And to us . . .”

“We gather the spoils!” The crowd exploded in cheers, rhythmically applauding as they chanted. “Po-ttok, Po-ttok, Po-ttok!” The arena lighting was flashing like a violent storm.

As the commander left the arena smiling, Jeff was not. He was stunned by the frenzy. Visconti, Grant, Morrissey, Falco—even Cooper was mindlessly chanting—eyes afire. Jeff had never taken him for a devotee, much less a mindless thug. But Cooper, like the others, had been here for years, and Jeff had only been in training for less than two weeks.

Something deeply sinister is happening here, Jeff thought. Only he remained seated—a small island amidst the tumult of a raging crowd.