

Chapter 26

I did not direct my life. I didn't design it. I never made decisions.

Things always came up and made them for me. That's what life is.

—B. F. Skinner

Legion of the Mountain Pony - Camp II

Basque Mountains

April 11, 2025

The following day Dr. Trios entered the detention area, and waving off the guardsmen, he entered the Asker-gamma's cell alone. As the heavy steel door clanged shut, Trios took a seat on a chair next to the bed. "The Lord Tertius has arranged another meeting with you, but before this can happen, I need to know if you're stable enough."

The Asker-gamma sat up, clear-eyed. He folded his arms.

"How do you feel?" Trios leaned forward.

"I'm much better now. I wasn't sleeping. It's this cell."

"Yes." Trios sat back, skeptical. "Well, Dr. Wilhauser is set to interview you in about an hour. What's with the emblem on your hand? It looks like a bull's head."

“It’s a goat’s head.”

“Okay, why a goat’s head?”

“It’s a reminder that I’m not one of the sheep.”

“Oh, so you’re special now. Is that it?”

“You know that I am. There were only three of us, and now one has left.”

“Which three are you referring to? Who has left?”

“The baker. He’s gone, and now there are only two.”

Trios nodded. “Okay, what baker?”

The Asker-gamma smiled into the distance. The skin on his face seemed stretched.

“Okay, why is time short?” Trios was curious.

“You know. The real game is about to begin.” The gamma’s eyes were smiling.

“You’ll have plenty of time to discuss this with Lord Tertius, and I think he would be interested in your thoughts.” He’s playing some kind of game. He’s obviously overheard someone talking about the Croatian baker, Trios thought. This poor bastard is barely hanging on—grasping at straws.

Asker sat motionless as though he was carefully listening to something, so tired of dealing with crazy, Trios stood to leave.

“Dr. Trios, you know he’ll kill you. Do you want to know when?”

Trios stopped halfway to the doorway. “Who will kill me?”

The gamma looked up. “We’re not your creation, Doctor,” the gamma mocked, “This is not your reality.”

Trios froze. These were the same catchwords he used when waking a newly jumped blank. “What did you say?”

Asker grinned. “You have many a debt to pay, my dear doctor.”

“Who are you?”

The gamma laughed hysterically, rising in intensity.

Trios fled and slammed the door in fear of a sudden attack. Leaning against the door in relief, he couldn't help but peek through the small observation window.

“Your time has come, Doctor. Soon you'll be joining us.” Asker-gamma's face began to flash likenesses of Trios's past victims.

Trios frantically fled the detention block. Careening off walls, he nearly collapsed to the floor, and bracing to catch his breath, he collected himself. “Shit.”

As Asker's laughter faded, two guards exchanged apprehensive looks. “What the hell was *that* all about, Doctor?”

Trios could feel color rushing back into his face. “When trooper Asker gets transferred to the psych ward, make sure he's bound,” Trios dared not look up. “And keep him bound. Notify me the moment he returns.”

Later that day, Asker admitted to his anger management problems. He was seated in Dr. Wilhauser's office, who ordered the bindings removed before the session. “After the gamma jump, I hear voices and have nightmares of disincorporate demons. At times, hours slip away. My senses are . . . are intense at times. I smell things, hear things that aren't there, and my vision becomes fractured. Worse are the sounds.”

“Sounds?” Wilhauser looked up from his notes. “What sounds are you hearing?”

“No, it's not that. The real world gets muffled but never muted. At times things sound like, like a bell that's been covered in heavy cloth.”

“These effects you’re experiencing are known effects of a clone jump,” Wilhauser explained. “They should diminish. Have you entertained any thoughts of suicide?”

“I did, but I don’t anymore.” He rushed out, “I’m much better now that I’m out of that cell. I don’t want to go through that again. I . . . I can’t.” John dropped his head and sobbed.

Wilhauser wasn’t fooled; he’d interviewed beta clones that over-emoted. “John, I want you to tell me about the voices. Did they tell you to mark your hand?”

“No, they didn’t.” He looked up, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. “I marked it.”

“Why did you mark it?”

“I was depressed.”

“What does the marking stand for?”

“Nothing. It’s just a nervous scratch because I was bored.”

“That’s not what you said.” Wilhauser picked up a sheet of e-paper. “This is a transcript of your interview with Dr. Trios. You were asked, ‘What’s with the emblem? It looks like a bull’s head.’ And you replied: ‘It’s a goat’s head.’ When asked: ‘Why goats head?’ you replied: ‘It’s a reminder that I am not one of the sheep.’” Wilhauser looked questioningly at Asker.

“Would you like to revise your answer?”

“Look, Doc, I wasn’t in my right mind. I . . . I said I heard voices damn it. I already told you that.” The Asker-gamma began to fidget.

“If you want me to help you, then you have to level with me. Otherwise, we’ll end this, and it’s back to the cell with you.”

The Asker-gamma’s head tilted to one side.

“What will it be?”

“Okay, Doc. It’s not a goat’s head, and does it look like one? Sure, but I cut myself to see

if I could still feel anything. It's this new body, Doc. It's messing with my head."

Wilhauser scribbled some notes. "What about the voices, John. What do they tell you?"

"Well, nothing about you."

"No? Okay, what about Dr. Trios?" He picked up the e-paper again. "Apparently you also claimed . . ."

"I know damn well what I said," he shouted, you people don't . . ." the gamma paused to collect himself. "I know what I said, Doc. I told him how much I hated him for what he did and that he was going to pay for hurting them."

"Hurting who?"

"He knows who, and he won't get away with it. Shit, Doc, you ought to know that."

"Did the voices tell you this?" Wilhauser pressed a button under his desk, calling for the guardsmen in the hall.

"No . . ." Asker suddenly changed, "Yes. You know what else they say?" He glanced at the guardsmen entering the room and sat up, wild-eyed. "They say that the clones are theirs, Wilhauser, but you know that already, don't you? And don't think that little cross in your desk drawer can save you. It didn't do Him any good—what will it do for you?"

At a nod from Wilhauser, the Asker-gamma was dragged from his chair and zip-tied

"John, I know you're in there. I can help if you want to fight them; I can help you break free."

The gamma stopped its struggling and turned towards the doctor. "No, you can't." His voice had lost its power. "You're too late."

John was crying in desperation as the guards dragged him down the hall.

“That’s correct—you’re finally beginning to understand.” It was the Scarecrow.

“I’ll not give in easily; I will fight you.”

“It’s not your fight, and there is nothing you can do.”

“What if I don’t want your help?”

“It was you who asked, John, not me. You wanted my help, and you must pay your debts to the kingdom.”

“I know, but I didn’t think it would be like this. I didn’t want this.”

“Maybe what you really want is to go back to the blood fields.”

“Please, don’t. I . . . I don’t think I can take any more of this.”

The guards traded grins.

One of them smirked. “What a whack job.”

They laughed as they threw John back into his cell to face more internal horrors.

Back in his office, Dr. Wilhauser was confused. He had watched Dr. Trios’s interview, where Asker had sat back on his bed, made an unusual comment, and then laughed about it. So why Trios’s panicky exit from the cell? I guessed right about the gamma. These changes are not physical, electrochemical, or psychological. He opened his desk drawer and, taking out the small crucifix, he held it up, wondering what he should say in his report to Lord Tertius.