

Chapter 31

Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous.

—David Hume

Legion of the Mountain Pony

Basque Mountains

April 20, 2025

The veil of smoke pouring from burning buildings choked the blood-red sun. Distant secondary explosions scattered his vision like concussive blows to the head. An enormous horned demon in Roman armor hacked at the clouds with a blazing sword as destructive lightning spewed down upon the broken city. When its attention turned to him, he cowered in mortal fear, for it demanded his obedience, either join or be enslaved. He cried out to Jesus Christ to save him from this fear, and the dream abruptly ended.

Bathed in night-sweat and chilled to the bone, Dr. Wilhauser shuddered as he swung his feet to the floor. He was no longer afraid, and he knew where to go with his life. Although confused by the imagery in his dream, he was convinced of one thing: Satan could not take him—the choice was his to make. Reassured, he leaned on the clothes hutch as he looked outside, encouraged by the coming dawn.

He had no longer had any doubt spirits existed because he'd met them in patients. The dream told him that they could be thwarted no matter how powerful a spirit appeared. The clones

who did not cooperate did so at the cost of their life—their second life—he reminded himself. If evil can only exist by choice, it follows that demons must be bound by rules, and if they have to follow rules, they're not all-powerful, and there's little to fear from them.

As a positivist, he had never believed that God or spirits existed and death was merely the cessation of existence. There was no afterlife, no new journey to embark upon, and if by chance there was, how could the moral constructs of this world be manifest in it? Unless it was somehow dependent or connected to this one, how could good or evil in this reality construct be the same in some other construct? If somehow connected, shouldn't people, at least, perceive it? For Wilhauser, time used to be relative and linear. When events occurred, their effects radiated outward as if traveling across the surface of a pond, changing only those aspects in their causal or dimensional wave. He felt that any notion of multi-dimensions or multiverses was irrelevant. If he couldn't affect them, how could he be affected? He also felt the same way about God because there was no path integral to Him. He was sure the brain was bound to the immediate, affected only by local causality and not some discarnate whim. This nihilistic approach demanded that there was no purpose to the universe. That moral code was selective to the individual. This illusion was pierced by the reality of spirits inhabiting the clones, for they most certainly acted with purpose.

As a student of astrophysics, he enjoyed playing with quantum theory. After he had dated an emotionally complex lady, the spatial movements of particles and their relationships seemed to pale in comparison. He considered the possibility that a classroom of maladjusted kindergarteners might be vastly more complicated than all the laws governing the formation of the universe. Thus began his interest in psychology, a field of study that didn't lend itself to many general regulations—considered more art than science. He understood that for any art,

society set most of the rules. In psychology, not all definitions of insanity were related to accepted morals. It might not be considered insane to marry a gourd. However, it would be crazy to expect it to bear progeny.

In his studies on origination, he concluded that the possibility of life forming by itself was not just a probability argument—it was simply absurd. Without symbiotic specificity of proteins, life couldn't exist, let alone spontaneously form. Unless the bioscience model built over the past two hundred years was structurally inaccurate, there had to be a Creator, and creation was an act of will. The foundation of his reality had held firm until he met the Asker-beta. He recognized the battle in John Asker to also be one of will. Such a realization had been right in front of him—or *in* him, as it were—all along. The human consciousness, the intractable reality of it, and its ability to control the material body all provided keys. Like waving a hand in greeting, the expression of any will that's realized could not just emerge from the body expressing it. There had to be something driving it. Now granted, mechanisms can be highly complex. But that complexity does not mean they are aware no more than the hand is mindful of the person it's being waved at.

Educated before the worldwide web, Wilhauser was aware that research of spiritual events had been primarily relegated to the Church. As secular researchers in psychology began to report similar findings from mental health counselors worldwide, a new classification of schizophrenia emerged. The Church labeled these as demonic—researchers called them misunderstood. Dr. Wilhauser understood the difference; it was simply a matter of belief.

Believing that the clone shells were inhabited by more than one entity, Wilhauser suspected these other spirits might very well be demonic and set out to study it. Unfortunately, much of the data on the subject was not reliable. Some of the more reputable sources he read

stated that demons were sensitive to religious objects. He decided to test this new knowledge on the Asker-gamma, who did acknowledge the crucifix's presence in the drawer but appeared unperturbed by it. Why the icon did not bring about the expected visible repulsion, he did not know. But he did understand why he tried to help Asker—and that he would continue to do so.

“So you think that's proof enough that Asker is possessed by other spirits, do you?” The Leprechaun leaned back in his chair, mysterious as usual. “And what does this information entail?”

“Entail, sire?”

“Of what use, Doctor? No need to be skittish here. How can we use this knowledge?”

The Leprechaun's casual acceptance of his theory knocked Wilhauser off-balance. He had little proof and assumed inductive inferences would be needed to argue his case. He gathered his thoughts in response. “My research into the aspect of demonology suggests that they, like all other beings, have rules to work within, sire—they may be bound by law.”

“Whose law, Wilhauser, Law of nature? What, you didn't suddenly go and get religion on us, did you? Because, of course, that would mean that I'm no longer your lord. Is this the case, Doctor?”

“No, of course not, sire.” He bowed deeply to hide his face. “I was merely pointing out that they must abide by some rules, and they may not be autonomous in their nature.”

“Rise, Wilhauser. I cannot make out your countenance.”

Wilhauser froze for a moment. Then, filled with a daring he had not felt since his youth, he slowly raised his eyes to meet the Leprechaun. He was confident, suddenly unafraid. “My lord, truly, one cannot serve two masters.”

With just one withering look from the Leprechaun, Wilhauser realized he'd gone too far. He slumped his shoulders once more and waited like a cowed dog before the lash. But the lash did not come.

“Dr. Wilhauser, I require an understanding of this new dynamic, and you shall provide it to me. I leave for Rome today, and the Asker-gamma will attend me. Upon my return in four days, you shall have some answers for me. Inform the Major of anything or anyone you require. This is a priority for me, Doctor. Do not fail me.”

Wilhauser was relieved and yet thrilled—which concerned him. The lie he had told had rolled off his lips too quickly, and that would have to change. The meaning of his dreams was now clear: He cannot serve two masters, but people can be served in his service to the one.

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“Let's have it again, Sergeant Cooper.” Mark was standing on Cooper's dislocated wrist. “Who was it that gave you the orders?” Mark had been interviewing Coop for a half hour. Initially, he was obstinate to Mark's interrogations, then he collapsed like a little girl at the first bite of pain. He couldn't believe what was pouring out of the weak little prick. It was insulting this guy was an American ex-Coast Guard. Evidently, the guy had no honest loyalty to the Legion and probably held no allegiance to anything but himself. What a prick.

Cooper winced. “I told you it was Major Wilkinson, commanding the First Cohort of IV Hispania Legion.”

The house phone rang. “Pardon me, boy.” Mark glanced at his watch. It was ten forty-five in the morning. Who the hell could that be?

“Mark,” Daniel exclaimed. “Thank goodness you picked up. You need to get out of that place immediately. Can you meet me at the site? I have some info you're not going to believe.”

“Yeah, me too. I finally got this little prick talking. I had to drug his ass last night, and he’s just woken up. Can you give me about two and twenty?” Mark figured he’d need a little more than an hour to drive to the town.

“Can you bring him?”

“Bring him? Not a good idea. Besides, I gotta get him some medical.”

“Why?” Daniel’s tone faltered. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothin’ he didn’t do to himself. I need to drop him at a hospital and get some PCs to guard him there.”

Daniel hesitated. “How’s Simkins? Did he make it?”

“Yeah, but just barely. He’s down in ICU, and they may be able to reattach the arm.”

Mark looked down at Cooper on the floor. “If not, maybe we can do one of those eye-for-an-eye things you religious types go on about.”

Cooper paled.

Daniel paused again, briefly unsure if Mark was joking. “That’s good news. Two and twenty it is then. Hurry, buddy, we have some decisions to make.”

“Okay, see ya.” Mark turned his gaze toward Cooper once more. “I don’t have much time to chat anymore. What say you an’ me skip to the end?”

“Promise to fix me up,” Cooper bargained, “and I’ll cooperate with ya, Detective. What is it you want? You realize I’m only a sergeant, though, right?”

Mark grinned. “Yeah, okay, I got a couple questions. Sergeant Cooper, is it? From Maine, you say?”

What a weak little prick.