

## Chapter 32

*The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false, and by the magistrate as equally useful.*

—Edward Gibbon

Lupercal

Palatine Hill, Rome

April 21, 2025

Deep beneath the ruins of Palatine Hill, Jeff adjusted the scarlet *zona militaris* sash across his breast as he wordlessly followed the nine other advisors into the Lupercal. Reconstruction lighting off the tiled domed ceiling cast an eerie golden hue over the room. Following the other advisors, he took his place behind the tall-backed chair labeled Hispania Legion. The breath of a flute echoed softly as a line of men entered through another door. Lord Tertius, comically undersized in the formal setting, marched regally over to take his seat. Jeff had to restrain the urge to giggle.

“By the will of Minerva, this gathering shall begin,” Sergius, the Secretary of the Legions, announced.

All bowed as the leader of the regency council took his seat. “Sextus Corvinus Aelius commanding.” The Secretary took his place behind Sextus.

“Gentlemen, good evening,” Sextus opened without preamble. “I have two additional items added to the agenda, and we’ll address them in due time. Lord Quintus, how are the Muslim suppressions proceeding?”

“It’s shaping up as planned,” The head of the Germania Legions and chief military advisor, Quintus Corvinus Adolphus, stood. “The last remnants of the Islamic State have been swept away. The coalition for the New Assyrian Territories has finally agreed to discuss the Secular State Charter. There should be no more rogue jihads than a few minor splinter groups. The Spanish autonomous regions are still sitting on the fence, but once Phase Two launches, they’ll come running. The Syrian autonomous regions and the African free states are at the table. We expect these regions to sign and ratify the SSA within the month. The Balinese separatists have finally agreed to terms.” He looked up from his pad. “Now that the charter is signed, the VII Legion begins to fill its ranks with volunteers. As you predicted, sire, they rolled right over. However, as I’ve stressed from the beginning, this charter in itself will not bind them without the sectarian leadership removed first.”

Jeff understood what this meant. One of Corvus’s primary missions was to solidify humanism as the predominant world religion. The Secular State Charter was a step in that direction. The charter provided the language for developmental funding and trade agreements when the free practice of religion was established. Religious doctrines were not to be the basis of any ruling government. The Roman SSA was imperative to establishing a Roman world government. In the new Rome, no religion would hold any importance over another. In a country with limited religious freedom, politics become zero-sum. When one side’s gain is directly

attributed to another's loss, the lines of division run deep, and necessary internal coalitions become fractured, making the region difficult to control.

Sextus opened the next topic. "Lord Hermimius, how are the transportation negotiations with China proceeding?"

"Not well," Septimius Corvinus Hermimius rose from his seat. "It has been difficult to find the right people to talk to. Political positions are once again shifting as communist power continues to lose its grip, and I think the new ambassador corp is . . ."

Jeff was briefed that China, being one of the largest secular states in the world, had been a focus for years. In her zealous need for rapid growth, she had left herself vulnerable in the market. It was a matter of logistics. China's ultimate goal of self-sustainability—just like Russia's—had been set back by more than a hundred years of mismanagement which greatly afforded Corvus new opportunities. As the meeting continued for the better part of an hour, Jeff was astounded by the breadth of discussions. Apparently, Corvus was interested in only a few select global industries—mainly energy and transportation. Currently, their primary focus is on new consumer markets. During the financial discussions, a map of global Legion holdings was shown. Jeff was surprised that his Lord held only three small insignificant regions. The largest was held by the big scary-looking guy with the braided beard—Lord Quintus. His Germania Legions encompassed everything east of France from the Black sea to the tip of Greece.

Jeff noted that with the Chinese, Indian, and African markets on the trade map, the emerging Persian and New Assyrian markets were the focus now that consumer marketing was permissible in areas traditionally closed. Oddly enough, outside of Tertius's smallholding in Canada, the entirety of North America was void of any bases. It all seemed to hinge on this SSA format. Jeff thought about the ramifications. From the exchanges he'd heard, the maxim of

consumer purchasing was “a little taste will always lead to a big appetite.” Each member discussed the microenvironment of the markets they controlled, what product group the people would desire next, and what they needed for marketing. Apparently, Corvus had been at this game for two thousand years, and it knew how to play it well. After the economic agenda had been exhausted, Secretary Sergius shifted to new business.

“Lord Quartus, your presence here is welcome—the India Legions have the floor.”

“Thank you, noble Sergius.” Lord Quartus Corvinus Aetius rose. “I’ve had an interesting breakthrough with a gamma clone from the VI India. It would appear that he can simultaneously control many blanks telepathically.”

Jeff heard a few scoffs in the murmuring that ensued. The High Lord Sextus raised his palm to quiet the room. Lord Tertius spoke next.

“I’ve had a similar experience with a gamma from IV Hispania. I’ve brought him here, for he wishes to address this council.”

Sergius raised an eyebrow. “This is a most unusual request, Lord Tertius. I don’t—”

“If I may.” Tertius held up a hand. “Sire,” He addressed the leader Sextus, “The man claims to be the prophet of Minerva, and I think he should be heard.”

Most were stunned into silence, but Quartus’s adviser, Captain Wilson, snorted in derision. Jeff had to stifle a laugh when he saw the man wither under Tertius’s murderous look.

“The advisers will clear the room,” Sextus ordered. He turned to his secretary. “Sergius, please summon Tertius’s gamma.”

Jeff was shocked when Asker strode by him into the chamber. Not only was he unguarded, but he wore a black-and-silver uniform modeled after Germany’s Waffen-SS. Asker marched up and bowed to Lord Sextus.

“Do I have your permission to speak to this august council?” Jeff heard Asker open on his way out.

Once outside, Jeff joined the group of advisors on the sidewalk outside the entrance gates to Palatine Hill. “What the hell was that all about?” Jeff asked, a bit confused at the sudden change.

No one answered. One of the senior advisers among them, Captain Henri Gaetti, an Italian from the VIII Germania, suggested they grab a drink at a local haunt.

“It’s got decent food, and there’s a backroom we can use while we wait. I know the owner quite well.”

“Sirs.” Secretary Sergius approached from behind. “I believe accommodations have already been arranged. If you would be so kind as to follow me, I will see to your comforts.” He started off but stopped long enough to urge them on. “This way, please.”

Taking a tourist trail to the top of Palatine Hill, they entered the museum through a maintenance door into a makeshift kitchen. Jeff was amazed at the long table decked out with iced crystal troughs of beer and wine and several plates of exotic food. Captian Dominic Wilson from the III Germania grabbed a beer for Jeff.

“What’s with this prophet shit? Our gamma’s been a little squirrely, but he didn’t make any bizarre claims like that.”

“I can’t tell you anything about it, sir.” Jeff was hesitant to meet his eye.

“Can’t or won’t?” The Captain pressed.

“Can’t. I don’t know anything about it, sir.”

“Give him a break, Wilson.” Capt. Gaetti grabbed a beer.

1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Henry Certus from III Australia joined them. “Yeah, he’s been ‘shroomed like the

rest of us.”

The others laughed, but Jeff was confused. “Why is that so funny?”

Lt. Certus handed Jeff a small plate of rock shrimp. “Lieutenant Forester once remarked that we’re so far out of the loop we’ll probably all be reincarnated as orphans.”

“Or worse, monks,” Capt. Wilson added with a snort. “Speaking of reincarnation, any of you guys get the new protocol on Quintus’s Immortals?”

Lieutenant Stefano Murtas of the XII Fulminata nodded. “Yeah, he’s proposed using clone jumps for surgical strikes and assassinations. He’s looking for volunteers from all the Legions that have . . . how did he put it?

“Religious leanings.” Capt. Wilson grinned.

“Yeah. We’ve asked for a more . . . definitive order. Though, it’s an interesting idea.”

“Indeed,” Capt. Wilson looked at Jeff. “We’ll have to do some tight screening on volunteers.” Some nervously laughed as Capt. Wilson scanned the room.

This guy’s got some power, Jeff thought. “Captain Wilson? I have a question about the economic dealings of Corvus.”

“Well, I’m no authority, but what’s your question?”

“It fairly obvious that Corvus doesn’t have assets in four of the largest economic powers in the world.”

“It takes two sides to trade, Lieutenant.” Capt. Wilson lit his pipe. “Also, the capital that flows from those countries feeds our endeavors.”

Capt. Gaetti joined them. “Capt. Wilson is correct about the balance of trade. There’s a tactical side to consider as well, yes?” He waited, obviously expecting an answer.

“Don’t poke the bear?” Jeff guessed at the obvious.

They all laughed. “Well,” Capt. Gaetti continued, “That certainly is sound advice if you’re not prepared.”

“Don’t face a larger opponent head-on.” Lt. Murtas interjected. “Smaller unit tactics are more flexible and can adjust quickly to the fog of battle.”

Jeff nodded at this. “Until the larger force commits on the ground of its own choosing. Then the outcome is inevitable—power wins.”

Lt. Murtas just nodded. “You guys hear about the Tawi River action?”

“Yeah, I read the brief.” Lt. Certus ambled off to talk cavalry tactics with Capt. Melvin Eckhart from the III Britannia.

“I haven’t.” Jeff accepted a small flask of whiskey from Capt. Wilson, who seemed to be warming up to him.

Lt. Murtas poured some red wine into a plain copper tankard. He offered a cup to 1st Lt. Nuri Dahl from IX Parthia. “It was your unit, wasn’t it, Lieutenant? How did it start?” “I heard it was a bit rough on those Muslim mountain boys.”

“Thanks, but no, it was the II India,” Lt. Dahl elaborated. “A couple cohorts from were running training exercises in the Kashmir region when these Muslim boys from a local band bird-dogged a supply helicopter. One week later, nearly twenty-five men from that group came in on a supply raid that killed one guard but was readily repulsed. We collected five men and quite a few wounded. Although they came away empty, orders came down to counterattack. Guess corporate wanted to see a combined clone and legionnaire group in an exercise.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Capt. Wilson gave Lt. Dahl a sideways glance. “*You’re* well informed. Guessing no orphanage for you.” He laughed.

“Sir.” Lt. Dahl light-heartedly bowed. “Anyway, the prisoners were quick to identify

their area of operation, which was based primarily in Pakistan on the Jammu border. They'd been running raids in the Kashmir Valley for years. When our scouts picked up a band of twelve insurgents foraging from the locals, they followed them back to their base."

"Were these Al Mansurin or Al Nasirin?" 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Boras from VIII Africana asked. "I was traded out of the II India and remember some groups running in that area."

"No, I don't think these were Islamists." Capt. Wilson drained his beer. "Maybe a Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front splinter group or something." He rolled his eyes.

"Anyway, we ran them down." Lt. Dahl cut the story short.

"You were there? Can you talk about this?" Jeff tried to hold back his excitement. His legion had barely begun joint clone maneuvers. He hadn't realized that some clone cohorts had seen action already.

"Certain operations are not to be discussed without clearance." Capt. Wilson stood. "But, if you grab me another beer. . . ." He laughed.

"Can do, sir."

Just as Jeff turned toward the coolers, the dark-haired, medium-built Lt. Murtas slid over. "So you're Lt. Tomas from IV Hispania." He handed Jeff two beers. "I'm Stefano Murtas, and I loved your tac-ops in the last virtual tactical and logistics games. Congrats on your promotion, by the way. Who would have thought of using foam-filled model cars for gate defense? It was inspirational."

"Thanks, Lieutenant, but it's not all that brilliant. I'd actually screwed up by leaving the BADE walls on the ship, so I had to get creative fast, but thanks for the notice. If you excuse me, I'd like to hear about some real field tactics." Jeff felt embarrassed to be noticed in this company of top advisers.



He returned to Capt. Wilson and handed him his beer. "Sir, you were saying."

"What?" Capt. Wilson broke off a conversation with Lt. Dahl. "Oh, I think he wants you to finish the story, Lieutenant." He waved a hand at Lt. Dahl to continue as a few other men slowly joined them.

"Thank you, sir." Lt. Dahl addressed the group. "Yes, well, once we established the forward marching camp, two cavalry squadrons were dispatched to draw the bastards out with a hit and run. The base had no mortars and only three beat-up trucks armed with thirty-cal. Even though the vehicles were too small to be used for transport, the mounted troops took them down with HEDP rounds from the Gustos."

"Gustos?" Jeff asked.

"Carl Gustaf M4 shoulder-fired missiles," Capt. Wilson responded.

Dahl continued. "When the cavalry started harassing them with frag rocks, they opened up with AKs and a 30 cal. When there was no returning fire, they got so confident they pretty much *walked* into action using a classic Russian bulls-horn attack. Their main body took up static firing positions. At the same time, two flanking groups of about thirty men each attempted an encircling maneuver through the forest."

"What was your defense?" Lt. Murtas asked.

"We had two clone squads in inverted C walls and another in reserve. "

"That's it?" Jeff barked out, immediately regretting it.

"Clones. You're using them for shock troops." Lieutenant Johann Forester from II Finnish noted.

"Yeah, it was fricking beautiful." Lt. Dahl smiled. "The enemy was wasting AK rounds on the defensive formation. You could tell they were very confused by the lack of return fire.

After about twenty minutes of this shit, we sent in the clones. The squads marched straight in with four open-box formations with two trainers on transmitters bringing up the rear. They were using the UHF short-range radio LOS, and I have to admit” He looked over at Lt. Forester. “The helmet comm systems were pretty sweet. When the enemy was really frustrated, they started firing in continuous bursts, so it was tough to hold the shields at times. But I have to say, the shield absorption effectively reduced ballistic spray.”

“What about the flanking troops?” Jeff asked.

“Cavalry got ’em. Well, mostly. The enemy concentrated their fire on the mounts, so rounds hitting the ballistic barding only just enraged the horses. A few of the mounted boys got tossed.”

“How did the clones do?” Lt. Murtas asked. “I mean, under the chaos of live fire.”

“Yeah, did any go zerkers like in the arena?” Lt. Boras was excited.

“Not at first.” Lt. Dahl smiled, “the trainers used two-one formations, so when the trailing squads closed on the enemy, most of them freaked and ran. Amazingly, the clones held defensive positions until given the command to rout. Then, all hell broke loose.”

Lt. Forester’s eyes widened in surprise. “You’re kidding, and they actually used a rout command?”

“Why’s that bad? Jeff asked.

“You see, clones under a rout command will charge wildly, basically attacking anything that moves—sometimes even each other. It’s challenging to keep them on a battle line, so tactically, it was a risky command.”

“Did it work?” Jeff asked, thinking he would have done the same. He recalled a maxim from the Macedonian King Philippi: when pressing an attack, press aggressively.

“Yeah, they advanced and slaughtered. One particularly brave enemy commander, who realized the effectiveness of our composite armor, charged up from behind, firing a pistol point-blank at the head of a clone. Well, it was an old Colt forty-five, and bouncing off the helmet, it knocked the clone on its ass. The two dopps who were with it went berserk, and after cutting the guy into pieces, they started rampaging.” He laughed. “It took four cavalrymen just to round them up—you should’ve been there. It was a freaking riot.”

“How many did you lose?” Jeff was not amused.

“One mount killed—eyeshot—and its rider suffered a broken clavicle, but he’ll survive.”

“A good day.” Lt. Forester nodded. “And the enemy?”

Capt. Wilson replied. “The after-action assessment had three hundred and thirty-two killed, twelve captured, and two released.”

“Why were they released?” Jeff asked, still trying to wrap his head around the event.

“To send a message to the enemy and anyone else in the area.” He gave Jeff a questioning look. “It’s standard tactics for first battle contact in a new area, and you should know that.”

“Jeff probably missed that this was the first military contact in the area,” Lt. Forester offered kindly. “So a rousing success then. Any other action or response from the enemy?”

“No, our scouts reported that the place was abandoned.”

Captian Wilson stood. The report also stated that insurgent activity dropped precipitously throughout the area. A formal complaint was made to the Indian government, but it was buried. India’s Research and Analysis Wing is still trying to figure out who hit the camp.”

A roundtable on training tactics and the efficient use of captured weapons followed. The men were all trained in using the prevailing weapons in their respective Legions’ control. Corvus

troops were trained to be logistically light, utilizing seized weapons. While the other advisors were engaged, Lt. Forester joined Jeff on the perimeter of the conversation.

“How long ago did you get the red sash—Military Advisors sash? I’m acquainted with your VSA ranking—way out of my league, he smiled. You’re a bit of a mystery to us.”

Jeff spoke without emotion. “I was conscripted into the IV Hispania four weeks ago.”

“Conscripted?” Lt. Forester sat back, clearly confused.

When recalled to the Lupercal, Jeff and the other advisers returned to their places behind council chairs. Jeff noticed that the Asker-gamma was no longer in the room. Sextus, conferring with his secretary, glanced over at him. Jeff’s slight bow was not acknowledged.

“Lord Novus.” Sextus sat down. “Your plans to open Phase Two.”

Lord Novus Corvinus Lucius of the Britannia Legions rose from his seat, bowing before taking out his tablet. A holograph blossomed over the stone table.

“When the chaos of Phase One subsides, one of the empty Indian supertankers will be pirated by a cohort from III India. In an ill-fated attempt to dock her, the ship will be scuttled, sealing off the harbor at Haldia in what the press will view as a terrorist act.” Looking up, he grinned. “We’ll select who the terrorists were before we collect its insurance. Over the next two days, six other tankers will be pirated and employed to block other Indian supply ports. The attacking forces will withdraw and capture these secondary ports for a week or until negotiations break down. By then, tanker insurance will be suspended for at least three days—or until the crisis is satisfactorily resolved.” He looked up from his tablet. “No tanker ship will sail without insurance. This should effectively shut down almost all oil imports for perhaps two weeks—three at the most. With oil imports blocked and no visible threat of attack, citizens will demand the

release of oil reserves for domestic use, placing a further strain on market pricing. Add the instability of international trade, and the markets should drop precipitously. Of course, the neutralization of Russia's Transneft will be essential for this to work." He paused to look over at Lord Quintus, who shook his head before waving for him to continue.

"Next, the assigned cohorts will attack the major ports within their zones." He surveyed the room, but no questions arose. "Lord Primus," He motioned him to take over. "Your room."

"Thank you." Lord Primus Corvinus Festus of the Parthian Legions stood as a new map appeared on display. "Gentlemen, what you see are the legion zones of control for Europe, Africa, India, Austria, and the Middle East." An overlaying image appeared. "These are the locations of the major ports in your areas. The order of battle requires your legions to capture these ports within two hours of the initial assault. After the oil tankers are immobilized, your forces are to hold these ports for a minimum of five days and up to two weeks without resupply or reinforcement. These ports must be taken intact, with workers captured alive and held for future deployment. This cycle will begin when the domestic oil shortage has reached the desired effect. Questions?"

"Do you expect this collapse to begin after the first or second week of Phase Two?" Lt. Boras asked.

"Our current models point to mid-second week. Remember: your legions are equipped for close-in fighting, so prepare your defenses appropriately. Negotiation strategies must keep this in consideration." He read the Lieutenant's mind. "There should be no problem withstanding any massed surface or air attack. They won't risk damaging their own assets. Your main issue will be logistics, so plan ahead." Lord Primus turned the briefing over to Lord Quintus, who called Captain Wilson.

“We project that within three weeks,” Capt. Wilson began. “There will be an unprecedented rush on domestic supplies. Many smaller governments will issue martial law before abandoning their posts, leading to anarchy. In the wake of this chaos, the assigned backup legions will be released for policing operations and humanitarian aid. Questions?”

“Sir, are the Mexican and South American legions to participate?” Lieutenant Boras asked.

“Not at this time. Some of the units will be available for backup contingencies.”

“When is the approximate launch date for Phase Two?” Lt. Forester inquired. “I’ll need to know how much time I have to move units in. Our Legions seriously understrength and pretty spread out.”

“You’ll be allowed two weeks to formulate your best plan. The time element is fluid since launch time will be based on logistic demands.”

The advisers traded glances. The situation was optimal.

“Are we to provide summary logistical data as well?” Jeff asked. What they were planning was monumental. He had no idea how he would accomplish everything in his zone of responsibility.

“Good question, Lieutenant. I think it best that you gentlemen plan for the best as far as logistics are concerned. When we review the operations individually, undoubtedly, there will be some tweaking. Once the operational plans are approved, we’ll look at the logistical feasibility and make the required adjustments.”

“A moment Captian,” Sextus interrupted. “Four legions will be reassigned from the Australian training camps. That said, you gentlemen will be responsible only for your zones.”

Capt. Wilson surveyed the others, waiting for more questions, but none came. “Once

you've completed your plans, I'll set up a presentation for my team. You have two weeks to formalize them." He bowed to the council, ending the presentation. "My lords."

Quintus returned his bow with a slight nod of approval. "The legion zones are almost complete. Most of the twelve zone legions are undermanned, so pick your fights carefully and remember police action is the main focus. I expect all of your men to control themselves. Looting and rape will be punished by public execution."

"What about shock troop replenishment?" Lt. Murtas asked. "All of our sixth cohorts—clone cohorts—are at less than 30%."

Lord Primus rose from his chair. "I have all the rough estimates on clone strengths, sire. Unless these clones can be stabilized, we're looking at converting some police units into shock troopers."

Sextus nodded. "Lord Tertius, where is your team with this?"

"We feel that more time is needed. The decision of this council did not bear fruit when we . . ."

"Excuse me," Quintus interrupted. "But can't your gamma help? He was quite convincing a few hours ago."

Sextus frowned at this. "Lord Quintus, our primary objective is to create a stable jump system." Sextus studied the others. "We need to focus on the five-year plan in which the clones are an intricate part."

"Ok," Quintus turned to Quartus. "Then what about the VI India's gamma?"

Quartus stood. "He was a Brahmin monk of the Sramana tradition who claimed he was to seek us out from a spirit he encountered during an astral projection on the fifth level. When he first became a beta, he insisted on meditating in the forest. Four days later, we found him dead

from self-emollition. After his elevation to gamma, he constantly talks to the astral spirits, often making little sense.” Quartus sighed. “Our doctors don’t consider him fully stable as of yet, but by the command he has over blank clones, he’s still in there somewhere.”

Quintus’s eyes narrowed at this. “Lord Tertius, pardon my rude interjections,” he sat down, arrogantly waving out his arm. Please continue.”

Tertius responded sarcastically. “Thank you for your courtesies.” He turned to Sextus. “We feel that now is not the time to renew jump experiments. We’d like to use the existing beta clones for gamma counseling experiments in an attempt to discover why they’re lying to us. We plan to sedate the betas at the jump threshold and wake them under the influence of psychotropics. As a matter of course, this council shall be updated on our findings. I will, however, need another doctor as Dr. Trios and I had a . . . terminal misunderstanding.”

“I can send Dr. Mocha Kindale to you,” Quintus offered. “Next to Dr. Trios, he’s the most experienced with jumps. He’s currently in Africa, solving a little problem with a nasty virus spreading through the clones of the IX Legion. I can also send Dr. Okeke. Although he’s not that experienced with jumps, he possesses a capable mind.”

“I thank you again, but I believe your secretary has already approved our trade request for Dr. Okeke,” he nodded politely. “You should get the papers on him tomorrow.”

“Very well.” Quintus returned the nod.

“Are there any other issues? Secretary Sergius asked.

“Approximately when will we receive the go on Phase Two, sir?” Jeff asked without thinking.

“Lord Tertius, your man.” Sergius’s response was firm but polite.

The Leprechaun turned on his chair and cuffed Jeff lightly. “Because you’re new,” he



whispered, “you’ll survive this effrontery. Never ask for orders. In due time you’ll be told what’s required of you.”

The officers were dismissed, and the session was closed. Afterward, Jeff met up with Forester, Murtas, and Dahl for a couple of more drinks, with Capt Wilson joining them a little later. The council members retreated to a private room to attend a ritual to Minerva that Captain Wilson could only describe to Jeff as “hours of unabashed carnality”.

Never attending the ritualistic parties, Lord Tertius strode down the ancient streets of Rome, imagining the new age to come. After the conclusion of Phase Three, the New Roman Empire, with its vast legions, would usher in world peace by crushing all opposition and shepherding the common brood. After civil order is restored, Corvus will have the people’s trust. Backed by Minerva and her prophet, the Emperor will take his place in the newly built Temple on the Mount, ruling as *Imperator et Deum*—Emperor and God.

And *I* will rule after him.