

Chapter 30

It is true greatness to have in one—the frailty of a man and the security of a god . . .

—Seneca, the Elder

Basque Mountains

Spain

April 20, 2025

After returning from Rome, Daniel entered his residence behind the church. He'd taken a separate cab because Mark needed to check in with the local authorities and Interpol, so after settling in, Daniel decided to call Andre the Basque guide and set up a spelunking expedition to get back to the chute. He was confident he could traverse the ninety-foot ceiling using a rappelling harness as a seat.

The landline rang. Daniel hadn't expected a response that quickly.

"Uh, Detective Hendricks, please," a woman inquired.

"Sorry, he's not here at the moment."

The line went dead.

Daniel shrugged as he hung up the phone. He decided to call the guide's house to confirm the expedition.

Outside, Guardsman Cooper sat with three clones and two house guards armed with real swords and shields in the woods behind the residence. The radio receiver on Cooper's wrist blinked green twice.

"Okay, boys." His voice quivered as he stood. "Let's take this guy."

Since Andy's death in the arena, Cooper had been promoted to Sergeant, graduating as full trainer. When the order had come down to capture the priest, he was selected to lead it, but the clones were barely trained, so Cooper wondered if this was some kind of test. Perhaps that was why the house guards are here, he thought. Gathering his will.

Cooper and the clones were dressed in full battle armor with muscle-shaped cuirass shells embossed with their Legion's emblem. The poly-fibered shell was a quarter-inch thick layer of carbon-fiber composite, interspersed with micro-cell antishock ceramic foam designed to dampen short-ranged ballistic impact. The foam liquified at high-velocity impact, displacing the kinetic energy before solidifying to seal the damaged area. The shell, layered at the waist, allowed the wearer up to a forty-degree bend with a vertically layered short skirt to protect the pelvis and upper thigh regions. The forearms, thighs, and shins were protected by bracers and greaves of the same material, which flexed to allow free movement. The undergarment was a thin, full-body sheath of antiballistic polymer composite.

Manufactured by a 3D printer, the armor was customized to specific body specifications, including the battle gloves shaped to reduce fatigue with scaled armored plating covering the back of the hand and fingers. The gloves featured a vice-like sliding mechanism to reduce the strain of an extended grip. The full armor weighed less than two pounds.

Cooper froze fifty feet from the priest's house when he noticed a car approaching in the

gathering dusk. He crouched low in the lawn with his shield upright. “*Manere*,” he whispered in Latin, motioning to the clones who were in a shield-down crouch. Oblivious to any danger, they looked around with mild curiosity.

Shit, it’s the cops. Cooper glanced back at the house guard for some sign of acknowledgment as two men got out of the car. After about ten seconds, his wristband flashed green twice. “You gotta be kidding,” he whispered, looking back at the house guards. When they waved him on, Cooper shook his head no, pointing at the sky—he wanted the deeper cover of night.

His wristband blinked green again.

Okay, eff it . . . here we go. Cooper stood, and after motioning for the clones to stay put, he snuck to the side window to get a look. Inside, a gruff-looking man was insistently pointing his finger at the priest. *Definitely American*. Another man, obviously bored, was leaning against a wall with his arms folded. He was also a cop and, based on his stolid expression, most likely English. Well, this is gonna suck . . . odds are they’re both armed, and these clones are open-ground fighters, so any attack inside the house is gonna end in disaster. He was about to abort when he saw the American laugh and put on his coat. Waving the clones forward, he led them around the house, setting up defensive positions between the house and car. They waited in a two-one formation with their black 2x4 impact-resistant scutum shields raised. The semitransparent shield, bordered with carbon-fiber composite edging, allowed only the bearer to see through it and not the opponent.

The Englishman, the first to exit the house, glanced back at the front door as he approached the car. Cooper waited for the American to step off the porch before initiating the attack.

“*Maymiare duobus unum!*” Catching the Englishman off guard, the three clones rose to the attack with orders to maim only. Confused by the shouted command, he recovered quickly and pulled his Glock 26 automatic, but before he could fire at the advancing shields, the trailing clone popped out from behind the shield wall and cut off his shooting arm off at the elbow. The gun discharged when the detached forearm struck the ground. The lead clones simply bowled him over, continuing forward without a second thought. Even though only eleven seconds had passed since the initial assault, Cooper felt the attack was taking entirely too long.

With his Springfield XD-9 already drawn, the American double-tapped the advancing clone shields to no effect. Backing away, he tracked his pistol, searching for an unshielded target before ineffectually firing again at the approaching shield wall. “Get back,” he shouted at Daniel, who had just stepped onto the porch. “Back inside.”

Cooper saw the priest gaping in shock, but before he could act, the door flew open, and the House Guards grabbed the priest. Cooper was pissed—this was *his* fight.

“Two formation charge,” he shouted in Latin.

The shields went up as the clones honed in on the detective while Cooper raced to the downed Englishman. Kicking away the severed arm with the pistol still in hand, he heard the American fire again. Although the shields partially blocked his view, a burst of red mist erupted in the twilight as one of the house guards snapped back, joining his mate, who was already dead before he stopped moving. Then someone shouted: “*Descendit protegat, quiesce impetum!*”

Cooper could only watch in astonishment as the clones halted the attack and dropped shields.

“Holy shit, It’s effing clones.” The American shouted.

After warning the clones to drop their swords, the American carefully headshot each clone. Looking down at the English cop, Cooper backed away from the pool of blood swelling

around him. It gave him an idea. “I think your friend here is leaking badly, so if you don’t shoot, I’ll withdraw, and you just might have a chance to save him.” Careful to keep his shield raised, he reached for the gun but could not pry it free using only one arm.

“Why are you here?” The American had picked up a shield and was advancing slowly. “Surrender now, and you won’t be harmed. I’m Detective Mark Hendricks from Scotland Yard.”

Cooper scoffed. “You’re a long way from Chicago is what you are, Yank.” Cooper didn’t hear the priest, nor did he feel the impact of the priest’s shoe against the back of his head. However, he did feel the acute lunate subluxation of his wrist as he fell forward onto his shield.

Back at the IV Hispania camp, medical tech Cpl. Baur was shocked to see Lord Tertius breeze into the operating room with personal guards in tow. Even though Baur was not in uniform, he still saluted. Scared shitless, it was all he could think of at the time.

“I’ll want a complete record of this, Corporal Baur.” Lord Tertius smiled. “Dr. Trios, I trust you’re prepared.” He glanced at the last Asker-blank strapped to an upright gurney.

“I am, sire.”

“You.” He motioned to one of his guards. “Send in the entertainment.”

The guard hesitated.

“What . . . are you deaf as well as mute? Bring me the Asker-gamma.”

As tech Bauer wheeled over a cart with surgical equipment and four dry-ice containers, he recognized the guy Asker, being rolled in on an upright gurney, naked and bleeding, he was strapped in with wide restraints. Dr. Trios threw on a white lab coat over his dark green surgical gear.

“I don’t know how you survived my little game.” The Leprechaun circled the gurney.

“But I’m a little disappointed it’s come down to this. They tell me that when a jump subject is traumatized at the point of death, the transfer rate climbs significantly.” He stopped to look him in the eye. “Just for you, I’ve planned some creative trauma—but don’t worry—I’ll have your eyelids removed so you won’t miss anything, and then after your jump, we’ll do it all over again.” He laughed. “But first, I’ll need to know how you controlled those clones in the arena and if you cooperate, I promise not to harvest you alive.”

“Truly, I can appreciate your cruelty,” The Asker-gamma calmly answered, “but I cannot tell you what you want to know. I can, however, give you another demonstration.”

Tech Bauer numbly watched as the now animated clone-blank freed itself from the restraints. Trios was slowly backing away in confusion as the clone approached.

“Doctor, has it somehow jumped already?” The Leprechaun stepped to the side.

“I . . . I don’t know.” Dr. Trios was fixed on the strange expression on the Asker-blank. “It . . . it, can’t be. That face.” He held up an arm in defense. “How did you get here?”

“What is it, doctor?”

The Asker-blank suddenly attacked, and with a surprisingly fluid motion, it flung Tertius across the room at one of his guards, who barely managed a one-handed catch. Tertius’s other guard started to shuffle across the room toward Dr. Trios, raising both arms.

“No, sire!” Trios cried. “I . . .” The clone deftly lifted him off the ground by the throat.

“I told you there would be a reckoning,” Asker suddenly announced from the gurney. “Your Lord Tertius was going to kill you, but as a sign of good faith, I’m happy to oblige him.”

Grabbing Trios’s head in a massive paw, the giant clone turned it slowly as muffled wet snapping sounds reported the doctor’s neck separating from the skull. It flung Trios at the guard who, protecting Tertius like a mother with a babe, easily swatted Trios’s body away.

“Untie me,” Asker-gamma ordered. The clone guard mechanically obeyed. The Asker-blank had stopped next to the upright gurney, grinning like a fool.

The Leprechaun snapped at his alpha guard. “Set me down, you big fool.” Setting Tertius down, he settled into a protective crouch. Tertius calmly strode in front of the guard’s protection. “How is it you can do that? Can you control any clone?”

“Any clone not possessed with a human presence.” Scarecrow sat up, and swinging his legs off the gurney, he noted that Tech Bauer was now babbling. When the Asker-blank turned its vacant eyes to him, he began to plead for his life.

“The world is full of these frightened little rabbits.” Asker approached Bauer, stopping to strip the lab coat off Trio’s twisted body, and still naked, he turned to the Leprechaun. “Is it not your group’s intention to unite these puny things into one great warren?”

“Who are you?”

“I am the Prophet of Minerva.” He declared while petting the back of Bauer’s head, who was now babbling in fear. “Now, now,” he cooed softly.

“How is it you know of these things?” When Tertius stepped toward the gamma, his alpha guard hesitantly stepped forward to protect him from the clone guard, but Tertius ordered him back. “You are useless before this raw display of power. Go, and take your clone with you.” He turned back to the Asker-gamma. “Release him.”

Asker thought a moment before nodding. Both guards left the room.

“Again, who are you?” Tertius demanded. “What do you want?”

“Like you, I am a soldier in Minerva’s legions, but I’m also known in some circles as the Scarecrow.” He leaned closer, and grabbing the back of the tech’s head, he lingered on a kiss before answering. “Come, Lord Tertius, it’s time I meet your friends in the Lupercal.” He locked

eyes with tech Bauer. “Make sure you take good care of my dopple-brother, love.” The Scarecrow’s gaze swept to the clone. “I’ll need him later.” He released tech Bauer, who numbly watched as the Scarecrow put on the lab coat and strode out with the Leprechaun hurrying in his wake.

“*Shit.*” Tech Bauer exhaled before dropping like a stone.

Anxiously awaiting news of Cooper’s raid, all four of the First Cohort’s NCOs had gathered in the situation room. They came to attention when Major Wilkinson entered the room.

“At ease, men. All nonessentials are to clear the room . . . not you, Sergeant Tomas. You will remain at attention.”

Jeff snapped back to attention. *Shit.* Somebody’s ratted me out about Jeanne—probably that idiot Mallox. Well, what did that boy expect? Jeff had skipped out on an evening mess call to rendezvous with the attractive French social worker earlier in the week. He had been off-base on unauthorized leave for four hours. Sergeant Carl Mallox of the Third Cohort had been dating her at the time but could not seem to keep her interest, so Jeff had decided to take a swing. It was a brief but captivating encounter. If France is even half as exotic as she was, I’ll need to spend some serious time in Paris. Jeff allowed himself a slight grin.

The Major glared at Jeff before sitting at the monitoring station.

Minutes passed.

“Nothing from the house guards yet.”

Both monitoring techs responded at once. “No, sir. . . .” Their voice cracked.

Jeff snorted at their nervous reply.

“You will keep silent unless you’re addressed, Sergeant. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir!” Jeff snapped, stiffening his stance.

“Very well.”

Another five minutes passed in silence before the door burst open, and like a sudden gust, the Leprechaun blew in. A giant guard lifted him onto a monitoring chair. With a subtle move of the hand, the Major remained seated. “Major, read the citations.” Lord Tertius tapped his knee impatiently.

The Major stood and straightened his tunic before opening his metal field case. “For meritorious dedication to duty and proficiency in tactics, Sergeant Jeff Tomas is hereby promoted to Second Lieutenant, with all the duties and honors attendant to that rank.” The Major removed the sword emblems from Jeff’s collar, replacing them with a single bronze laurel.

“Congratulations, son.” He shook his hand.

Jeff was shocked. Promotions were typically done in formation before the entire cohort.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Tell him the rest, Major.” In a rare display of joviality, the Lord Tertius actually looked pleased.

“The rank of the military adviser has also been bestowed upon you.” Eyes hard, the Major handed Jeff the certificate. “Present this to the quartermaster, and he’ll provide you with the appropriate sash.”

Lord Tertius laughed aloud. “I’m displeased with the informal presentation of these honors. However, certain events that have recently come to light have left me little choice. You will be accompanying me to Rome in one hour. Major, see to it that he’s properly fitted.” The Leprechaun hopped off the monitoring chair and stopped midway through the door. “The Cooper raid was a failure, Lt. Tomas.” He pointed his stubby finger at Jeff. “I will not tolerate another

one.”

“Yes, my liege.” Jeff bowed, and after the little man had left, he looked at the major. “I had nothing to do with that raid, sir, and you know it.” Jeff returned to attention.

The Major held up his hand. “Gentlemen, if you could give us a moment.”

The Major turned to Jeff after the room cleared. “At ease, lieutenant. Promoting a man with no military background and only a few weeks of training is ridiculous and bad for morale. After all, what kind of message does that send to the rest of the Legion? When I protested this unwise action to Lord Tertius, he said that the future shape of an unfinished piece of clay stands as a testament to the potter. Do you know what this means?”

“I, I think so.”

“Good.” The Major’s face softened. “Son, remember one thing: he doesn’t make these moves without purpose, and the sooner you can discern that purpose, the better your chances are of surviving it.”

Jeff nodded in appreciation of the rare fatherly advice.

The Major’s demeanor evaporated as quickly as it materialized. “Day-officer,” he shouted, stepping into the hall. “What the hell are you still doing there, Lt. Tomas, you leave in less than an hour, and you still need to get to the quartermaster. Now, get your ass moving, or I’ll have you flogged for dereliction of duty.” He grabbed Jeff’s arm as he tried to pass. “And another thing . . . if I hear about you skipping detail for some French tail again, so help me, I’ll have you cleaning clone shit for a month.” He winked at Jeff before storming down the hall.

“Day-officer! Where the hell are you?”

* * *

“And what in the hell are you going to do with him?” Daniel asked, nodding at the unconscious Trooper.

Mark had called for backup, and ambulatory assistance was on the way. Although they had managed to tourniquet PC Simpkin’s arm, he had lost a lot of blood and trembled violently under the shock blanket.

“Stash him for one. After what the archbishop said, I don’t trust anybody when it comes to this clone shit.” Mark heard a helicopter thumping in the distance and looked up into the darkening sky. “Dead people tell no tales.” He shrugged.

“You’re not going to . . .”

“No, of course not. You watch way too many American cop movies. I’m just going to have a little chat with our friend here.” Mark stuck his foot into the side of the Trooper, giving him an unkindly shove. “Look, Priest. I suggest that you go bury yourself in some cave until all this blows over.” As sirens began to wail in the distance, Mark grabbed the man’s leg and dragged him towards the house.

Daniel pulled his phone and checked the time. He needed to call Therese, the wife of the lead guide, and leave a message on his ETA. The crew would meet at their house in Arrasate instead of the cave site, and once there, they would gear up and drive to the national park’s lot before hiking the last mile to the cave site. It was an unusual request, but he thought the open ground would reveal any unwanted observers.

Since spelunking had no need for sunlight, he entered the house to gather up his gear in preparation for the nighttime excursion. After Mark set Cooper on the couch, he met Daniel in the kitchen. “So, what’s the plan? Where do I find you?”

“I won’t be reachable in these caverns.” Daniel spread out a map on the kitchen breakfast

bar. “You won’t be able to contact me for the next four days.” He smiled smugly. “Hey, it was your suggestion I go to ground. Here’s the number for the town’s bar. We’ll try to be there at, say, midnight four days from now.”

“So much the better.” Mark checked his automatic. “Who runs this place while you’re gone?”

“There’s a full-time groundskeeper and two altar boys who only show up on Wednesday nights and Sunday.”

“This groundskeeper, does he know where you go caving?”

“Yes, but we don’t always go to the same spots. I get it. Don’t worry about me. The men I cave with are a pretty tough bunch, and they know the ground. If anybody tries to mess with me, they’ll be in for quite a surprise.”

“Don’t take this for granted. Something terrible is happening here; somebody’s using these things as weapons. So seriously, don’t leave any crumbs.” Mark grasped his hand and pulled him closer, pounding him twice on his back. “I’m getting kind of used to you, Priest.” After offering a quick salute, Mark stalked outside to check on PC Simpkins and await the rescue personnel. Daniel followed him out, tossing his gear into the small blue Renault, and without another word, he drove off.

Careful to take a circuitous route to Arrasate, Daniel examined the events of the past few hours. You just watched Mark kill five people— three in cold blood—and it doesn’t seem to bother you, his consciousness accused. Are you becoming insensitive because of all this, or are these deaths necessary? He knew he should feel something about it, but he only felt tired.

He remembered in the book of Joshua and the Lord commanding the invading Israelites to give the people of the land no quarter. They called it a ban, or herem, which means purge in

Hebrew. Anything placed under the ban was utterly destroyed, with all material possessions either buried or placed in the treasury. On the way up to Caanan, they put every living thing to the sword. All life was extinguished, men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, donkeys, even pets—expunged— like those during the flood or Sodom & Gomorra. Unlike casualties of war attributed to men, these events were commanded by God.

“Vengeance is mine,” Daniel spoke the litany aloud. “I will repay, says the Lord.”

God ordered this so the evil of the people, mostly Baal worshipers, was contained like a contagion because the evil would spread if not contained. He considered this in the light of the clones. Were they evil or just animals, as Mark suggests? Someone had to have birthed them because they sure looked human, even if they didn’t act the part. Mark also called them weapons because they witlessly seemed to be under some kind of spell, but that’s ridiculous. There is no such thing because God’s gift of free will is protected. But it’s strange how they dropped their shields on command and just stood there while Mark shot them dead, one at a time. He wondered what Archbishop Arazola was so concerned with and what was up with the Roman garb. What are they doing with these clones? He pulled into a fuel depot and, grabbing his car Bible, he opened it to the section in Revelations that described the return of the Christ.

And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God; That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both

small and great.

And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army. And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone. And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.

—Revelation 17-21

“The battle before the millennium kingdom, Christ’s thousand-year reign—a lot has to happen before that occurs,” Daniel muttered. “First comes the time of Jacob’s distress where under attack, all Israel cries out for the Messiah .”

He glanced into the rearview mirror as he mulled over the prophecies. In the book of Daniel, the Antichrist was from a new Roman Empire. The clone’s shields carried Roman insignia, and the commands were given in Latin. Are the legions indeed forming? He needed to find out what the hell was going on with the clones and why they wanted to capture him. Were these events signaling the end of times?

For years now, thousands of young Muslims had visions, and old men had had dreams—all of Jesus—even Imams were converting. The Christ seems to be calling his Church while the increasingly secular Jewish nation is abandoning God, just as had been foretold. The new temple in Jerusalem is nearly complete, and it will be open to all religions, and a Syncretic religion will

form, diluting the truth of God by confusing His word with human values. Humanism is rising worldwide, with people making God into their image. Politics is their religion, freedom their sacrifice—he shook his head as though to clear it. He knew better than to entertain such negative thoughts. He finished the refueling. “If God needs me to do something, he will let me know.” He calmed his mind by humming some old David Crowder tune.

Arriving in Arrese, Daniel had barely knocked on the door before it flew open.

“Hello, Father Daniel.” Andre’s wife swamped him with a hearty embrace—warm kisses flooded his cheek.

“My dear Therese, you’re a sight to soothe.” Beaming, he held her out in front of him.

“Where’s Andre?”

“You know him.” She rolled her eyes. “After I passed on your call to the team, they couldn’t wait to hit the bar. They want you to join them there.”

“I see. Well, I’m in no mood for frivolities, so could you please make a call down there and tell . . .”

“Look, there’s no need.” She pointed behind him. “Here they come.”

The raucous Basque men hooted as the truck pulled up to the house, and Daniel could only laugh as they waved him over. One of the men was already retrieving Daniel’s gear from his car, and after a few choice words from Andre, he abruptly tossed it onto the lawn.

Daniel set a fist on his hip. “No, guys, we need to set out now.”

After a few minutes, they convinced him that they could still make it to last call if they hurried—it was only 9:30 p.m., and the bar was just five minutes away. Against Daniel’s better judgment, they subjugated the bar until last call. Heartily singing as they staggered back home,

they left the truck and quite a few brain cells behind.

After gearing up in their spelunking suits at seven the next morning, they returned to the truck and began to load it. Daniel—still buzzed from the night before—was loading the repelling harness for the ceiling climb when Andre nudged him in the back, pointing to two men who were approaching from across the road.

“Do you know these men?” Andre asked in Euskara.

“No.” Daniel replied in English, “but they look American. At least the little chubby fellow with the floppy hat does. The other guy—I’m not so sure—he looks like he’s just come off some long illness.”

The other guides gathered as they watched the strange pair approach. “You want us to deal with them? They could be with those guys hunting you.” Andre moved forward, but Daniel held him back.

“Seriously Andre? These guys are obviously lost. Best let me handle this.”

The chubby one walked straight up to Daniel. “You must be the guy.” He turned to his companion. “I almost gave up.” His eyes started to water as he pointed at Daniel. “He must be the guy.”

Daniel thought the man was drunk. “I’m sorry, do I know you?” His voice was skeptical, and hearing Daniel’s tone, the Basque guides began to encircle the two Americans.

* * *

Markander paused at the hostile looks of the men—he’d seen it before. Walter just walked right up into the middle of them: “Hi! I . . . I’m Walter Cavic. This is, uh . . . Dr. Downing.” He offered his hand.

Markander reluctantly stepped into the middle. “I’m sure you don’t know us, but we were

sent here to learn about the kingdom of heaven from one of you.” He hoped his cheery demeanor would make up for the awkwardness. “Unless there are some other men dressed like you guys nearby.” He looked around before offering his hand. “Name’s Markander. I’ve been told by a holy messenger that you will instruct me about the kingdom.”

A thin athletic man with blurry eyes stepped forward. “I’m Father Daniel, did you say a holy messenger? A messenger from God?” He looked down at the men’s extended hands without shaking them.

“Yes,” Markander noted no reaction from the other men. “Walter, I don’t think these other guys speak English.” He laughed nervously, pulling Walter’s hand down.

“A messenger . . . an angel.” Daniel stammered out.

“Yes. Called himself Raphael—he directed us here from Philly.” Markander noticed Daniel was getting pale. “Are you ok?”

“Well, I sure am glad you finally showed up,” Walter added nervously. “We’ve been here for three days, and we’re getting a little . . .” He shrank a little from the imposing faces of the guides. “We were losing a little faith in the event like maybe we had the wrong town or something.” His laugh was strained.

Daniel quickly sobered. “Truly.” His color returned. “Gentlemen, do you have a car?” He offered his hand in friendship.

Markander was surprised at the sudden transformation. “No.” He shook Daniel’s hand. “We took an auto-Uber in from the airport.”

“Then please, gather your stuff and meet us over at that brown pickup truck, and hurry, we don’t have any more time to waste.”

“Why?” Markander asked, surprised, “Where are we going?”

“Have you ever tried spelunking?” Daniel smiled before heading to the truck.