

## Chapter 33

*It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand which bother me—  
it's the parts I do understand.*

*—Mark Twain*

Basque Mountains

Under one of them

April 23, 2025

After Mark finally arrived at the cavern and introductions were made, Markander gave everyone a long rundown of his experiences to date.

“So if I understand things correctly, this Novak baker guy you cloned channeled an archangel. Am I getting this right?” Incredulous, Mark glanced at the others. “Anybody else got a problem with this story?”

Walter offered a shrug of his shoulders.

Markander, though was pissed. After all he'd been through, the last person he wanted to explain himself to was some flat-footed cop. He crossed his arms and stood his ground. “Look, pal, you don't know what we've seen. If I were you, I'd keep your comments limited to what you can grasp.”

Daniel roared in laughter at this. His deep-throated laughter echoed in the cave-like a

chorus of drunken Gregorians. It was infectious, and soon the entire group was laughing uncontrollably as the pressure of past events escaped in a torrent of uncontained mirth. A confused-looking guide approached Daniel and asked in heavily accented English, "Is it wise to be drinking more cider, Father?"

Still wiping tears from his eyes, Daniel assured him it was, and picking up another jug, he tossed it to Mark. "Okay, guys. Can we put all this together?" He winked at Mark. "Doctor, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine named Mikel. Fill him in on these new events. You'll have to join me in Rome if that's amenable." He took a pull from the jug and pointed at Walter. "Your friend here as well."

"No problem. It would be an honor." Markander shook his head from the cider. It was the first alcohol he'd drank in years.

"I'd definitely be interested." Walter accepted the jug. "Though I am curious about this organization Corvus you spoke of. Really? Roman legionnaires? Now that the detective's here, could you now give us a rundown?"

"Sure," Daniel nodded. "Archbishop Arazola tells us the organization dates from Emperor Domitian's time in the first century, and apparently, they are still in operation. We don't know what they are after, only that they have twice tried to capture me."

"I'd be interested to hear it from your perspective, Doctor." Daniel looked at Markander.

"Other than my knowledge of the clones, I'm afraid there is little else I can offer."

Mark stood up. "Well, here's what I know. The group is well funded, highly organized, and extremely ruthless.

"I'd go along with that assessment," Markander agreed.

"Oh, so you do have something else to offer?" Mark's tone was not friendly.

“Yes, well, I do know they have lab facilities worldwide.” Markander looked up at Daniel.

“Yes, and apparently, this group has its own army as well,” Daniel added.

“Yeah, but not a very dedicated one.” Mark sat back on a rock and took a long pull from a cider jug. “I just got through interviewing one of their soldiers, and no, I didn’t hurt him.” He shot a sideways glance at Daniel. “Much.” He handed Walter the jug. “They’re not part of this Raven group—that I did get from him—but they must work for them. He claims to be a soldier in the Hispania Cohort.”

Walter almost dropped the jug as he spewed cider from his mouth. “You’re kidding.” He wiped the cider off his coat. “A Roman army cohort, really?”

“Yeah, they attacked the priest over here with three clones armed with swords.” Mark grinned. “They were also sporting bulletproof armor and shields.”

“They *what?*” Markander grabbed the jug from Walter, who was suddenly reluctant to share. “How do you know they were clones? What did they act like? Were they normal-looking, ah, behaviorally? Did they speak?”

“Whoa, Nellie. Let me finish.” Mark took another long pull. “The three of them were with these three other guys, and the one I interviewed was controlling these clones with voice commands—in Latin. And . . .” He laughed, “And this priest here, he understood ’em and ordered ’em to drop their shields. It was frickin’ beautiful man, saved our asses, he did.”

“They trained them to respond to voice commands?” Markander sat down, suddenly light-headed. “Well, shit. I guess it’s no different from using trained dogs.”

“Yeah, I thought the same thing,” Mark added. “But dogs don’t attack in military formation, and they don’t use swords.”

“Swords?” Wally blanched.

“So what happened?” Markander asked.

“Mark ordered them to drop their weapons, and when they refused, he headshot them, one by one.” Daniel’s grim tone had a sobering effect. “Apparently, they don’t respond to English.

“Look, Daniel, they weren’t human, He whirled on Markander. “Right, Doc? You tell him. I’m fed up with this argument.”

“Well, technically,” Markander began carefully, “they’re not. I mean, what makes us human is our special awareness, right? You should know this better than I do, Father. You refer to it as the soul. And from what I’ve seen, that *is* the correct word. We grew these things just like they were some kind of bacterial strain or a skin layer, only a lot more complicated . . . and no, I didn’t create them. We used the genetic material already present.”

“*Ergo peccatum per prius est in potentiis anime quam in essential . . .*” Walter searched his memory for the last word.

“*Mens*,” Daniel finished for him.

“What’s that?” Markander asked, looking over at Walter in wonder.

““Therefore, sin adheres to the essence of the soul rather than the powers of the mind.’ It’s an argument by Thomas Aquinas.” Walter shrugged. “Hey, I’ve been studying.”

Daniel explained. “It mainly deals with the concept of original sin being an aspect of human nature and not a personal sin.”

“In English, buddy?” Mark asked.

“Basically, it was once thought the Original Sin of rebellion is passed on by our nature. It’s like an innate biological coding that can’t be changed—something we’re born with, like skin

color.”

“You’re saying we have a rebellious gene?” Markander asked, somewhat amused at the idea.

“No, not really. I used the genetic reference to sin as innate, a part of us from birth, indelible, but this may not be the case. The issue may be a lack of faith in God. To have faith in a thing, we have to know it, accept that knowledge is true, and then trust in that acceptance. So faith cannot be passed on genetically—but it can be passed on.”

“You’re referring to non-biological action, spiritual action?” Markander asked.

“Yes.”

“This is consistent with my theory that the clones are acting as a type of gateway for other spirits. Because spirit is discarnate, the only way they can act in this material world is to attach to a transferred spirit in a human clone.”

“Why human clone? Why not other living things?” Walter asked.

“We already covered that.” Mark interjected, “Apparently, spirits can’t control animals because animals ain’t got no will.” Mark slurred a little. “They can’t just step in and run the machinery.” Right, Doc?”

“I, I haven’t thought of it like that but . . .”

“It’s a matter of free will.” Daniel said, “A gift from God to humankind so that we may have a self-binding relationship with Him—founded on love.”

“Animals can’t love, father?” Andre spoke from the shadows of the cave.

Daniel turned to him. “I don’t know that, but what I do know is that without free will, there is no love.”

“What about it, doctor?” Mark challenged, “Do animals have a will?”

“They do, but not a free will in a sense we are describing. Animals cannot free themselves of instinct.”

“How ‘bout the clones that attacked us?” Mark pressed. “They didn’t act freely.”

Walter stood. “What if there is no free will to these clones? I mean, then different rules are going to apply to them—is that not so?” He turned to Markander, who handed him a jug. “You’ve been trying to understand how a clone could be possessed by many spirits— is this not the root of what we’re talking about? Without a soul, these things have no free will, and that suggests they could easily be controlled or occupied.” Walter took another swig of cider. “I suggest we operate under the assumption that these clone things aren’t human until a soul transfers into one. They can be easily possessed because there’s no will to protect them. But wait. A blank clone has no will, so can a spirit just jump into one?”

“No,” Mark answered. “We already covered that. There’s nothing for the entity to entice, right Doc?”

Markander nodded at the logic. “Hey, Daniel, you said you were attacked by a possessed clone. What was it that made you think it was possessed?”

Daniel thought a moment before taking a long pull of cider. “It spoke in different languages.” He looked over at Mark, who smiled the word choice “*it*”. “It also seemed to change personalities . . . but the kicker was that it spoke in a completely different manner than the first time I saw it. At times the . . . what did you call it before, Mark?”

“The legit.”

“Yes, at times, the legit seemed to emerge and plead for help but was quickly silenced. It was weird. It said it was looking for John Asker, but apparently, John Asker was the one trying to get out. At one time, it referred to itself as ‘legion’ in Greek.”

“Legion? You mean it’s from this Roman army?” Walter was getting light-headed.

“No, as in, ‘Legion, for we are many.’ It’s a quote from the apostle Mark by the possessed man in the tombs of Gerasene. It was a bit of theater drama, though, quoting it in the Greek and all. I think it was trying to send me a message.”

“Did its breath smell bad?” Markander asked.

Daniel smiled. “Terribly.”

“Yeah, what’s up with that?” Mark turned to Markander. “I’ve been wondering. The clone in Chicago was reported to have bad breath, but only the one that was the scientist at Hologenesis. The witness’s reports on the other one didn’t mention foul breath. Say, come to think of it, the three that attacked us didn’t smell, either.”

“Near as I can surmise, it’s from the stress on the body from when the soul enters it. The odor should dissipate after the body adjusts. Kind of like a new pair of boots.”

“Hey, Doc, are there any other physical differences with these clones? I mean, like, a way to combat them?” Mark hoped to find a weakness he could exploit.

“Yes,” Markander replied, “they have bodies like a twenty-year-old, only better developed, with better eyesight and hearing. Their skeletal frame is interwoven with carbon-fiber mesh, and they’re less prone to disease. They should have a longer lifespan, with a superior neural system allowing faster reflexes. However, their balance is not fully developed.”

“Great.” Mark drained the last of his jug.

“They don’t grasp projectile weapons, and they do have difficulties in problem-solving if that helps.”

“What about the psyche?” Daniel asked. “Any problems with the baker clone? The one that attacked me was definitely unhinged.”

“No, not that I saw.” Markander searched his memory. “It seemed logical to a fault. Walter?”

“Yes, there was something I didn't think of earlier. Remember when I was asked to wait out in the car at that nutjob's office in Philly?”

“Kind of . . . why?”

“When he suggested that I leave the room, it was as though the thought was already in my head before I heard him speak it. I seemed to be connected with him or something. Then for some reason, when I decided to leave the room, I realized it was the most correct decision I had ever made—well, short of marrying my wife. Does that make any sense?”

“You mean capital H-i-m?” Daniel asked.

“What? No, the Novak-clone, and I felt that he had connected with me telepathically.”

“It talked with you how? Told you what to do in your mind?” Mark shifted impatiently on the rock he was using for a seat.

“No, nothing that dramatic.” Walter suddenly felt self-conscious. “It was more like a powerful suggestion.”

“Great. This just keeps getting better.” Mark tossed the empty clay cider jug, shattering it on the cave's rocky floor.

“What's your problem, Detective?” Markander had had enough of his negativism.

“I'll tell you what my problem is.” Mark stood to grab another jug. “There's a bunch of these unsympathetic clones hunting us, and they can control our thoughts.” He spoke loudly enough that words echoed in the confines of the cavern.

“Sounds like parenting to me,” Walter quipped, trying to add some levity.

Daniel smiled. “I don't think that's the case. Mark, remember what Father Stempora said



about other spirits? They can't control our will." He turned back to Walter. "Did it feel like it was compelling you to act?"

"No, it just felt like I was doing the right thing by leaving." Walter looked at Mark. "It's hard to explain." He shrugged, feeling a little light-headed from the exchange—and the cider.

"It's okay." Mark stood up and stretched. "I'm just tryin' to figure this thing out. We've got to keep this all in perspective because these events are weird enough." He smiled and patted Walter on the shoulder. "Hey, buddy, I'm havin' trouble sorting this whole thing out myself, and they pay me to do it." Mark heard something clatter on the rocks and turned toward the cavern entrance just as a concussive wave blew past him, followed by a bright light that made it look like the sun had just entered the cave. "Stun grenades," he shouted. Weapon already in hand, he was moving quickly to the nearest cave wall. The grenade had fallen into a small hollow in the cave floor, significantly minimizing its effect.

From the entrance twenty feet above the small stream they had been sitting beside, two eight-man squads of Roman soldiers were fanning out to attack. The Basque guides, quick to recover, were already moving to the defense.

"Shut your eyes and guard your ears!" Mark shouted as another dark disk sailed down from above.

The second blast caught Walter and Markander flat-footed, and both were blown down incapacitated. The guides headed to a rock shelf on the left, so Mark decided to take the right side. He dropped to one knee and fired two rounds at the first helmeted soldier that appeared. The bullets from his XD-9 struck the trooper in the chest, knocking him two feet backward. Mark spun back into a niche in the cave wall. When he peered out, the soldier he'd shot sat up.

"Shit. They're armored." He breathed to himself.

As two more legionnaires ran past him, Mark stepped out of the shadowed niche and aimed for the back of the neck of the closest one to him. His first shot ricocheted off the man's helmet, propelling his head forward, allowing for the second to find its Mark. The round didn't penetrate the soldier's thin bodysuit, but the concussion to the spinal cord would surely prove fatal. Before he could find another target, Mark felt cold steel on the side of his neck.

"Drop it or die." A mechanical voice spoke.

Mark could barely make out the words. His ears were so toasted from the gun's report off the cave wall. He slowly lowered the hammer and paused with the weapon up as three more men, with short swords drawn, rushed past him.

"I said, drop it, ass—"

The soldier had messed up by leaving the sword in contact with Mark's shoulder. It was all he needed. Rotating away from the blade, Mark slammed his pistol into the armpit of the soldier's sword arm. Slipping behind the soldier, he grabbed him by the helmet visor and drove him backward until he felt the blunt impact from the pommel of another legionnaire's sword. Then everything went black.

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Sergeant Moller headed down to the cavern floor following the strange Captain dressed in a silver-and-black uniform with owl emblems on the collar. The Captain paused as though listening to something. "Five legionnaires of your trooper are down, two bleeding badly. Three of my men are dead, two of the local guides are injured but still operational. I do not see the priest.

The sergeant looked up where the Captain was staring, and he couldn't see anything or anyone. "How do you know this?"

“It’s classified.” When they got to the cavern floor, the Captain furiously whirled about. “Is he still with us?” The Asker-gamma demanded, stabbing a finger at the unconscious detective.

Moller checked his pulse. “Yes, he’s just been knocked out.”

A corporal came up to Moller, “Sir, we have two men captured, but the rest have escaped deeper into the cavern. Five of our troopers are down, and three from the black cohort.

The Captian looked up to a ledge, where one of the Black-uniformed troopers was scanning the cavern. “Six more troopers have been cut down and their weapons and gear captured. That makes eleven of sixteen dead.” He looked at Moller with cold eyes. “You’re from the IV cohort, right? What kind of outfit are you running, First-Sergeant?” The Captain howled with rage. “Your idiots . . . with total surprise, you couldn’t catch a cold. I will see that each man is . . .”

“Control yourself, sir.” Sergeant Moller removed his helmet. “What’s the problem here? We have their supplies, and there’s no other way out of here.” He didn’t know who this Captain was, but he definitely didn’t like him.

That may be so, but now they have your swords and grenades,” he ranted uncontrollably. “We must . . .”

“Excuse me again, sir.” Moller carefully put some distance between himself and the Black uniformed Captian. “Corporal Falco, gather what’s left of your team and move these prisoners. We’ll use them as shields. TrooperKim, I want you to recover the dead and stabilize the wounded for transport. Send two men to guard the entrance and get a signal to the scouts for air trans.” Moller moved farther away from the Captian. “You, Trooper Jennings. Get over there and zip-tie these pricks.” He walked over to Markander and kicked him in the ribs. “Tie this

asshole up against that rock.” Moller then pulled Walter to his feet and, drawing his sword, he shouted into the cavern’s recesses. “Priest, I don’t care about your cave rats,” his voice echoed, “but I do have orders to collect you alive and bring you in. I’ll give you five minutes to surrender.” Walter cried out as Moller sliced into his arm, opening the brachial artery.

“Tell him, Doctor. Tell him how much time he has before your friend here bleeds to death.”

Markander defiantly returned his gaze, and Moller slapped him hard in the face with the flat of his sword. “Go ahead. Tell the priest.”

Markander spat blood with a defiant look. Seeing the rate of flow on Walter’s arm, he called out in a defeated voice. “Father Daniel, Walter has been cut . . .”

“I heard him,” Daniel called from a small ledge only twenty feet away. “If I do surrender, what chance do my friends have to live? I would rather see them killed than surrender to the likes of you.”

“You’re wasting time. While you jabber on with your false bravado, your friend’s life drains onto the floor.” Sgt. Moller was not easily fooled. “None of your companions will be harmed. My orders are to bring you in alive.”

The Captain removed his helmet and leaned in toward Markander. “You won’t find me so agreeing, dear doctor.” He grabbed his face and licked at the blood oozing from the sword blow.

The sergeant saw movement in his peripheral vision and turned to see the last black-uniformed man approaching, helmetless, with wild eyes of blood lust. Moller stepped back, quietly unsheathing his sword.

The Captian taunted Daniel. “Would you like a demonstration of what my friend can do?

You men should be thinking of their families, their wives, and daughters.”

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Daniel sighed as he rolled over onto his back. Oh shit, not this Scarecrow asshole again. He heard rustling behind him and turned to see one of his guides crawling toward him, grenade in hand. Daniel grabbed his arm and shook his head no. “Wait, hold your fire.” He sat up to shout out to the rest of his team. “All of you, dammit. Hold your fire!” He turned and whispered to the guide, “Tell Andre to retreat into the Rust Cavern and find the lava vent that leads to the surface. Go, gather your families, take one week of supplies, and set up camp there. I will get back to you when I can.” He was confident that the Basque men would obey out of deep respect.

“But, Father, how will you do this thing?” The man whispered back.

“I don’t know, but something tells me everything will be all right. Now, do as I ask, and don’t think you can follow these men. They will have more scouts.” Daniel stood and held out empty hands. “Okay, you win. I’ll surrender.” As he climbed down, a legion corpsman was already tending to Walter’s arm. Daniel saw that another eight soldiers had arrived, and two came forward to bind him.

“Well, Priest, we meet again.” The Scarecrow grinned maliciously at Daniel. The portable lanterns played eerily across his stretched skin.

“I know who you are, *el espantapájaros*. Your battle is fruitless, and your master defeated. What do you hope to gain here, demon?”

The Scarecrow’s backhanded blow nearly knocked Daniel off his feet. When the stars cleared, he was surprised to see the Scarecrow falter, his face suddenly aging like before.

“You must help me, Father. I can’t do it alone,” It was Asker. The body of the Asker-clone began to tremble.

“No, not alone,” Daniel understood. “Beseech the Lord Jesus Christ to aid you. Call on him for only he can save you.”

Heat began to radiate from the Scarecrow as inhuman howls rose from deep down in intensity until drowned out by white foam pouring from its mouth. It collapsed where it stood.

“What the fu—” Guardsman Jennings leaped back.

The other black-garbed trooper howled like a wounded animal before hacking into the nearest legionnaire with its sword.

Stunned by the sudden violence, Sergeant Moller stood agape for a split second, and that was all Mark needed as he rolled his legs into the sergeant bowling him over. Then, pivoting off his hip, he kicked Moller squarely in the chin, knocking him out.

“Attack, ye men of Basque!” Daniel shouted in English before attacking the surprised corpsman who was still tending to Walter. It didn't matter that only a few understood English, as the Basque men knew what to do. Three Basque guides fell upon the rampaging clone, while one held it in a neck lock, the other two wrestled it to the floor. It took every ounce of their strength to hold on until it passed out from asphyxiation. In less than five minutes, it was over. After corraling the remaining legionnaires, they relieved them of their weapons and ballistic armor before binding them into groups of three. The Scarecrow, zip-tied where he lay, had yet to regain consciousness.

“Attack ye men of Basque?” Mark scoffed at Daniel. “What the hell was that?”

“I got . . . carried away.” Daniel shrugged while cutting the ties off Markander's wrists.

“You called him a demon.” Markander winced as he spoke, his face already swelling from the blow. Still processing the events, he walked over to check on Walter. “Was he one? And how the hell did you do that to that crazy asshole?”

“I didn’t. When I saw the Scarecrow—Asker’s possessed clone—I knew what needed to be done, what I should have done the first time we met. *We* can’t fight them, but I’m good friends with someone who can.” Daniel grinned.

“What about these guys?” Walter feebly nodded at the nine bound and gagged legionnaires. He was ashen-faced from the shock and loss of blood.

“We leave them here alive and let their scouts deal with them.” Daniel looked the bound Corporal Falco in the eye to assure him they would not be harmed. “And I want the wounded tended to,” he added in Euskara for the Basque men. Turning to Andre, he continued in Euskara. “Let’s open that lava vent in the Rust Cavern and use the pulley system to get these people and our gear out.” He paused, then continued in English: “And make sure everything is checked for transmitters. Smash anything that even looks electronic before you take them.”

“That includes all phones—they stay here.” Mark tossed his at Daniel. “I’m gonna take a gander outside and make sure their backup doesn’t suddenly surprise us. You two.” He pointed at some guides. “Grab two of those dead Troopers and some of that rope. We’ll use them as sentries until their scouts show.” He winked at Daniel. “Let’s move, people . . . their scouts will wait only so long.”

Daniel translated the order to his men, giving Mark a thumbs-up. “Nice possum act back there.”

“Yeah, I’m so pissed I was that stupid not to set a sentry.” Mark shook his head in disgust as he looked down at Walter. “I’m such a fool for getting us caught like that.”

Markander looked up. “But not so foolish you couldn’t get us out of trouble. Nice work, detective.”

“Yeah, how’s Walter, Doc?” Mark asked.

Markander stood and spoke softly out of Walter's earshot. "I can patch him up with the medkit easily enough, but he's going to need some downtime, at least two days' bedrest—he's going into shock."

Daniel furrowed his brow in concern. "All right. We can stay at Andre's for a few days."

"That would be a bad idea," Mark cautioned.

"Well, we can't stay here." Daniel knelt to help Markander wrap Walter in a shock blanket. "And if we can't stay here, and we can't go to Andre's, where then?" Daniel looked at Mark.

Mark looked around, assessing his little band: Wally was shivering in shock, Markander's face was badly bruised, with one eye already swelled shut. Blood was still seeping from Daniel's nose and mouth, but he looked ok. Two of the guides wore tourniquets from deep sword cuts, and Andre looked white as a ghost. "Where can we go?" Mark repeated.

They all looked to Mark.

"To Rome. Where else?"