

Chapter 1

*There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn't true;
the other is to refuse to believe what is true.*

—Kierkegaard

Legion of the Mountain Pony

Basque Mountains, Spain

April 23, 2025

Under the gloaming of dusk, a six-man scout team from the IV Hispania cautiously approached the mountain base. The lead was confused. Two stories up the rock face, two legionaries guarding the cavern entrance had not responded to his signaling. As his team spread out into pairs, Lt. Ramos again used the LOS-comm to flash-signal the entrance guard closest to him. Still, no response. He switched the comm device from the Legion-net to the Centuri range channel and located Cpl. Derik, two hundred feet away on his left flank. “Corporal Derik,” Ramos spoke softly into the comm, “You sure there’s no other way in there?”

“To the best of my knowledge, that’s correct, sir. Although, unlike most of these caverns, this one has yet to be fully mapped.” Derik rechecked the 3-D image of the cavern on his datapad to be sure. “This *is* the only known entrance, sir. The entire system descends from this point.” Derik, a geologist assigned to the Third Centuri, First Cohort, of the IV Hispania Legion, was attached to the five-man scouting team as an advisor. His database on the local cavern systems was extensive.

“Very well.” Lt. Ramos sighted the man crouched to Derik’s left. “Corporal Dias, I’m going to try visual confirmation. Screen our approach—have Derik remain with the gear.”

“Sir.” Came the clipped reply.

Ramos stepped out from his cover, and from the angle he was at, only the guard’s heads were visible past the protruding rock. Still, no movement, he thought. There is something very wrong here. Forty-five minutes ago, he’d been contacted by the assault team to close in and await prisoner transfer. SOP required a confirmation response before his team advanced on any strike target. He hesitated for a moment before switching back to the legion net-comm.

“Air 41 . . .”

“Go ahead.”

“This is S39 actual. What is your position?”

“We are SW from your pos, in-bound in twenty.”

“Begin a grid search one-half north of R1. Make a tight grid for GP, using IR only. Make a two-box sweep.”

“Roger that. What are we looking for?”

“Report all contacts, passive on EM and RF.”

“Roger S39. IR and transmission sweep. Air 41 out.”

Scanning the area one last time to be sure, the leader quickly covered the thirty feet to a weathered rope ladder hanging off the rock face. After a minute of listening, he motioned for his team.

He thought this was supposed to be a simple capture mission of some lowly priest. Already two guardsmen have been executed for failure. Then the Beta team from Epsilon squad botches a

simple raid and gets wiped out, losing two more guardsmen. What is it with this priest? Why is he so important?

After the observation team traced the target to the Aizkorri-Aratz Natural Park. Lt. Ramos's recon team had been called to lead them in. After his team located the priest's party, three squads were dropped a mile away and guided in by his team. One of the squads was dressed in black uniforms he'd never seen before, all wearing the mysterious Sixth Cohort insignia. Three squads for one priest and a couple of backwater tourist guides? This op stinks, and now the strike group is unresponsive.

After scanning the area once more, he silently climbed the ladder, stopping at a rock outcrop just to the side of the entrance. Faint shouts were coming from inside the cavern, and he could hear the ringing of steel. Combat. Carefully looking around the outcrop, he saw the entrance guards were asleep. Sword drawn, he stepped out to announce himself.

"Hey, trooper!"

No response.

"Hey . . ." Covering the ground in three long strides, Ramos saw the guards were suspended by ropes fastened to the rock wall. Cutting one free, he knew the man was dead before the body hit the ground.

"Air 41, this is S39 actual," Ramos called his ride.

"Go ahead, S39."

"Request to Central, immediate backup on my pos."

"State your status, S39."

"Two guardsmen down, status of primary team is unresponsive. Requesting backup before further recon."

“Roger that, contacting central.”

I really don't like this. Ramos rescanned the area before stepping out in the open to signal his team to advance. Three minutes later, they were all huddled at the entrance, with Cpl. Derik, wide-eyed from the corpses.

“S39, this is Air 41.” His earpiece seemed loud.

He breathed the response. “Go ahead, Air 41.” His head cocked at the clanging steel ringing from inside the cavern.

“Orders from Central, you are to link with primary immediately. Backup is en route.”

“Roger.”

He shook his head at the recklessness of the order, but orders were orders. “All of you, on me.” He slipped the tiny comm device from his ear, handing it over to Cpl. Derik, “You will wait here for backup. If there's any trouble, I'll signal Tango, and you get your ass out of here. Understood?”

“You're seriously not going in there,” Cpl. Derik whispered, pointing to the two dead troopers.

“Orders from central. Back-up is en route. Air 41 is doing a grid sweep to the NW. They will call if anything is discovered. It's set to channel four.”

Cpl. Derik looked away before snapping on the belt transmitter. He verified the appropriate channel before setting the earbud, and with a deep breath, he gave the OK sign.

“It's going to be okay, Derik. Just follow your training.” With a glance, he checked the readiness of his men. “Follow me.” With confidence, he did not feel Lt. Ramos led his three-man team into the cavern.

Rushing to the edge of the entrance ledge, he saw wild shadows playing across the cavern wall. Four men in legion grey were squared off against two black uniformed legionnaires. In a defensive semicircle, the greys barely held the attackers at bay. Taking a moment to absorb the situation, he saw five grey troopers already down, three of them bound together in a pool of blood. There were no other hostiles in view. “Hold.” He shouted, striding down the narrow slope that led to the cavern floor.

Hearing the shout, the two black-uniformed men backed away from the sound. Crouching low, they readied themselves like animals assessing a new threat.

“Sergeant, identify yourself. What is the meaning of this?”

“I’m Sgt. Moller, Third centuri, Sixth of the Fourth. Your men need to kill those things, Lieutenant, and quickly.”

Coming to a halt on the cavern floor, he ordered his scouts to guard the greys.

“You two, identify yourselves.” The Lt. strode between the combatants, “Captain?” He asked in surprise. Recognizing the rank insignia on the black uniform for the first time, he dropped his guard.

Unsure of this new event, the black-garbed men were hesitant to respond.

“Lieutenant, I’m telling you . . .” Sgt. Moller warned.

Lt. Ramos turned angrily to Sgt. Moller. “Shut up! I want to know why in the . . .”

The black-garbed troopers attacked before Lieutenant Ramos could finish the statement, decapitating him with two fierce blows from a sword. The head rolled past Sgt. Moller.

“Son of a . . .” The stunned scout Dias was slow to the defense.

“To your swords.” Sgt Moller screamed at the scouts.

Picking up Lt. Ramos's sword, the Captain charged with the two swords whirling in attack as the other man struck out from behind with lightning stabs. Clanging steel rang off the rock wall, and after a few minutes of attack and parry, three more greys were down, one mortally wounded.

Sgt. Moller knew they were screwed. The black-uniformed troopers were too powerful, too well trained.

"What the hell is going on here?" Cpl. Dias shouted. There was a bite mark bleeding from the Sergeant's forearm.

Gasping for breath, Sgt. Moller ignored the question. "You got a signalman posted?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then get to him. We need backup and medevac." He ordered with a gasp, sidestepping a feint and thrust.

"I can't just leave you . . ." He raised his sword to cover the weak feint from an attacker, stepping back as a sword strike brushed his arm. One of his fellow scouts lunged in a flank attack, only to be rewarded by a neck slash that severed his spine.

"We're toast here anyway." Sgt. Moller pulled Dias back just in time. "Look, these guys know only two or three attack forms. The rest of us can hold them at bay for about another fifteen minutes. Hurry, they don't tire as easily as I do."

Dias hesitated when an attack by two more greys was repulsed. They retreated, ragged and bleeding.

"Move it, corporal, that's an order."

"Sir!" Before he could get to the entrance, another squad rushed in.

“Sergeant Moller, you are not to harm those clones.” A black-uniformed lieutenant shouted as many troopers streamed down the rock slope. Capture nets were fired at the attackers.

“Clones?” Sgt. Moller dropped to one knee as stars began to fill his vision.

* * *

Lord Tertius Corvinus Faustus, known to his men clandestinely as the Leprechaun for his diminutive stature, entered the detention center of the IV Hispania. His guard, a massive man armed with a seax strapped over his shoulder, towered over a very surprised sergeant-of-the-guard who jumped from his chair, fisting a salute.

“My lord.” He hastily buttoned his collar closed. “I did not receive notice of your arrival.”

“Of course.” The Leprechaun took in the general disorder of the guard room. “I’m here to see Sergeant Moller.”

“Yes, sire, he’s . . .” The Sergeant looked away for a moment. “I was ordered by Cmdr. Carter to have him detained in the commander’s quarters.”

“Fine.” He waited two full seconds, “Well, sergeant, let’s get on with it.”

“Sire.”

Only confusion and embarrassment followed their wake as the Sergeant led his liege through the various checkpoints. Arriving at Cmdr. Carter’s quarters, a guard stood hastily, straightening his appearance before coming to attention.

“Sergeant,” Lord Tertius purposely kept his voice low. The guard had to bend down to hear. “I will overlook this lack of professionalism in your men just this once. The next time I find your staff out of uniform, you will find *yourself* under guard. Do I make myself clear?”

“You do, sire.” He whispered back.

“Fine. You will remain here.” He addressed the guard at post. “Is Sgt. Moller alone?”

“Yes, sire. As ordered, he has been fed, and a new uniform provided.”

“See that we are undisturbed.”

Entering the room, he frowned at its pristine condition. Because the place was so well ordered, it told him that Cmdr. Carter had lost control of the LPs—Legion Police, and he would have to rotate him out.

* * *

Head wrapped in gauze and one arm in a sling, Sergeant Moller exited the bathroom and jumped to attention. After his transfer to these quarters, he’d been told to expect the Leprechaun. Since there had been no mission debriefing, he knew it was something to do with the Black Cohort. There had been many rumors of an all-clone Cohort, and until three days ago, he never would have believed them.

“At ease, sergeant.”

“Sire.” He stood at parade rest, thankful his uniform was in top military order.

“Take a seat, sergeant,” Lord Tertius swept out his arm, “I am here for an informal report on the cave incident and thought it best to speak with you personally.”

“Sire?” The Sergeant slowly took a seat—he knew the word informal meant trouble.

After training up the X Germania, he was familiar with how screwed up the Legions could be—especially the Hispania, or so he heard. The Leprechaun seemed distracted, which was a rarity for the stolid Legion commander. Into his second year at the IV Hispania, he’d never seen an operation handled so smoothly. Three-quarters of any military unit are total screwups in their first year. The difference between a good and a sloppy command is how long it takes to whip it into

shape. In less than three months, the IV Legion was over 87% in total aptitude scoring, unheard of for such a nascent unit. The rumors about the Leprechaun now seemed not so hard to believe.

“A talk sergeant. Is there something wrong with your hearing?” The Leprechaun’s creepy eyes bore into him.

“Of course not, sire. Forgive me for my momentary confusion. Since the cave incident three days ago, I have been imprisoned and placed under guard without a debriefing.”

“Yes, I had placed you under protective custody until my return.” He challenged. “Have you been mistreated?”

“No, sire, I . . .”

“Then, relax.” Lord Tertius waved his guard out of earshot. “I need information on the Asker-gamma.”

Moller’s eyes widened. “Forgive me, sire. What’s Asker-gamma? I’ve . . . never heard of it.”

“I’ve kept you in isolation because you have seen something that no one has ever witnessed in the history of this organization. The defeat of an . . . extended spiritual entity.”

“Sire?”

“Don’t play coy with me, Sergeant. You know very well what I’m talking about.”

“The Black Cohort.” Moller sat back.

The Leprechaun smiled. “Yes, what do you know of it?”

“Mostly rumors and wild speculation, sire. Before my transfer, I was told that this was a therapeutic cloning facility for organ replacement but nothing about cloning an army.”

“We are indeed cloning organs *and* humans. The process is slow and terribly expensive, but there are some advantages. You see, the clones can be rapidly grown and biologically

conditioned to exceed even the strongest man of conventional training. We can enhance the senses, strengthen the skeletal system, and even extend the life span—but that’s not the best part.”

“No, sire?” Moller was concerned. Why is he telling me this?

“You see, after just eighteen months, these clones emerge from the growth tanks at the physical peak age of twenty. When released, it takes another eight months for their bodies to adapt to the environment.”

“That’s an incredible feat, my Lord. I can see the advantages of troop replenishment and rapid expansion.” Moller sat back, “You’ll need some top-notch trainers.”

“That’s not why I’m here talking to you, Sergeant. The clones emerge from the tanks non-sentient.”

“I’m not familiar with . . .”

“They have no free will, Sergeant, and that has many advantages. They don’t require payment or any distractions common to soldiers, like wine, women, and status. They follow orders to the letter and don’t shrink from hard work. They don’t possess sophisticated aspirations, threat recognition, or seek advancement. They are the perfect soldier in many ways.”

“Yes, sire. Except they can’t think for themselves. But, as history has proven, the ignorant will always be conquered by the wise. Brute force can only destroy—it takes wisdom and knowledge to build.”

“I see that I have not erred in you.” The Leprechaun’s eyes glittered. “I want you to take command of the Black Cohort, which carries the rank of Captain.”

“Sire, I don’t want to seem ungrateful, but I have no interest in being a . . . being cloned.”

“You are ignorant, Captain Moller. I need to fill you in on cloning before we can continue.” He beckoned his personal guard. “Have some snacks, and . . . what do you drink off-duty, Captain?”

“Whatever you like, sire.”

“Very well.” The guard took their order. “The clone jump phenomenon was discovered entirely by accident four months ago when a Dr. Markander Downing had successfully cloned the first human. As I said, it emerged from the growth tank non-sentient, meaning it had no conscience or self-awareness. When the cell donor, or Alpha, died, his consciousness, memory, character, and awareness—basically all of the elements that define a human being, were inexplicitly transferred into the clone. This is called a Soul Jump. Since cloning is expensive and difficult to control, with many failures, we only clone three per Alpha. The success rate of a Soul Jump is low, less than twenty percent, and when an alpha-Jump does occur, the clone awakes unstable—at times ravingly mad. A clone-to-clone second or Beta-Jump is extremely rare and has only occurred twice. The product is called a gamma-clone, and you’ve met one.”

Moller nodded, “The former Captain of the Black Cohort.”

“Correct. The Alpha, John Asker, was one of the few to have a beta emerge relatively stable when he jumped. After his second jump—a Beta-jump—a powerful entity emerged and took control of the clone body.”

“But it couldn’t hold it.”

The Leprechaun looked down. “Explain this observation, sergeant.”

“The priest apparently knew the Asker-gamma, talked to him like he knew him, called him *el espantapájaros*.” Moller looked up questioningly.

“It’s Spanish for scarecrow . . .”

“Yes, then in the same sentence, he called him Demon. Said you were defeated already.”

Tertius looked up. “He called me out by name?”

“No names. I think the priest just declared that Asker’s master was defeated, and I assumed he meant you.”

“Did the Asker-gamma identify me?”

“Ah, no, sire. As you said, it was prone to raving.” He hesitated, trying to think how best to explain the subsequent sequence of events.

“Come on . . . out with it, man.”

“It . . . the Asker-gamma changed, its raving ego shrank, and . . . it deflated, it actually asked for help. It was physically shaking, going on about something it couldn’t take anymore.”

“Then, the priest tells it to talk with Jesus.”

“Excuse me?” Tertius leaned in, “I didn’t catch that.”

“Jesus Christ. He told him to go to Jesus Christ. It was then the other clone went zerkers.” Moller reflexively grabbed his bandaged arm. “The Asker-gamma must have somehow got me down because when I awoke, I was tied to trooper Myers, who was screaming like hell for me to wake up.”

“What happened to the priest? Did it kill him?”

“I don’t know,” He looked away. “When I finally got to my senses, the clones had already hacked apart one trooper and were working on the other trooper he was tied to. The poor man’s face was so badly beat-up, I couldn’t tell who it was.” Remembering the inhuman screams from the bound trooper made him pause to collect himself.

“Trooper Myers was yelling at me to help scoot over to a nearby pile of swords, and thankfully, we did. While the clones were busy clawing the shit out of the second group of bound troopers, we were able to cut ourselves free, then free two other troopers.”

“And the targets?”

“Gone.”

“Elaborate, Captain.”

“After the clones were secured and the Black Cohort squad left, I ordered a complete sweep of the cavern for EM and IR. I placed the geologist, Cpl. Derik in charge of the scanning teams. He dialed the settings up to check for drafting and air pressure, something I didn’t consider, to locate any chutes that might lead out. There were none. The scout team already had a helo on a grid search in the area, and they found nothing. The priest’s party just vanished.”

The Leprechaun furrowed his brow. “Speculate.”

“They have to be somewhere in the cavern system. Many chutes led off the main cavern, so searching would take some time. Cpl. Derik thought the system continued down, so I would only explore chutes that rose up. Also, because there was no drafting, they must have draft stopped a chute. We find that plugged chute, we find where they went, but I think a search is a waste of time.” He waited, careful with his opinion.

As a few moments passed, the Leprechaun’s face remained unreadable. “Continue.”

“The supplies they were carrying would only support that many men for three days, and that’s if they have a potable water source. Also, the chubby American had lost a lot of blood, so I don’t think they can wait it out—my guess is they’re already out. There are four towns nearby, and two are reachable by rivercraft. I’d search those.”

“Very good, Captain.” The Leprechaun slid out of his chair. “Oh, one more thing. The two Americans that were there? One of them was Dr. Downing, the lead researcher for the cloning project.”

“Why would he be here?”

“A good question. Did he seem unusual in any way, like the other clones perhaps?”

“No, not really.”

“Thank you for your time, Captain. Once you are settled in your new quarters, report back to me. I have some things that will need your immediate attention.”

“Sire?”

“The Black Cohort has begun joint exercises with the First. I have some ideas on trainer-clone communication I want you to implement.”

* * *

As Tertius walked down the hall to the detention cells, he was oblivious to his surroundings. Nothing was surprising in the interview with the Sergeant—now captain—Moller. He knew most of the details from the debriefing reports. It was now clear that the Asker-gamma himself had ordered the mission, which was a problem.

It was enough this spiritual entity had the power to break into the material plane. It also had complete knowledge of Corvus’s past history and future plans. During the last Corvus meeting in the Lupercal, the Scarecrow showed an intimate knowledge of Lord Adolphus’s ritual killing of his brother—a sacrifice to Minerva. It was something even he had never heard of, and the Asker-gamma couldn’t possibly have known. For the Corvus Council, it was clear from these proofs that the Scarecrow’s claim as the Prophet of Minerva was legitimate. Then somehow, it gets itself

expelled from the host. “No, not somehow,” he spoke aloud. “It was exorcized.” Moller had said the Scarecrow was expelled by just speaking a name.

“Excuse me, Lord?” The Sergeant leading him stopped.

“Never mind. Where is Trooper Asker’s cell?”

Since the Asker clone was now a useless blank, he did not allow Wilhauser to analyze it. What do I fear? I fear the unknown, Tertius thought. How does Markander wind up in Spain allied to some backwater nobody priest the Scarecrow was so interested in capturing? What’s the connection? It doesn’t make any sense. The Prophet reveals himself, changes the council’s mission priorities, then returns to order an ill-planned attack on this priest. He then masquerades as Captain of the Black Cohort and leads a joint clone assault team that gets wiped out by a few tourist guides. Obviously, another battle is being played out here. I must get some intel.

“Captain Asker is in here.” The Sergeant unlocked the door. “Dr. Wilhauser ordered it to be bound.”

Tertius stared into the cell. Hands bound to a five-foot tether on the far wall, the clone could only reach the center of the room. Dr. Wilhauser had been adamant that the entity inhabiting the Asker-gamma was bound by rules. If it can not act with impunity, it’s fallible in this reality and susceptible to attack. That is the only saving factor from this whole mess because now I’m vulnerable to my enemies. I have to trust that Sextus can recognize our mutual advantages.

Before entering, he ordered all monitoring devices shut down. Taking no chances with the Asker-blank, he ordered his clone-guard away, entering with just his human guard. Tethered to a wall ring by a synthetic polymer rope stronger than an iron chain, the clone looked up when he entered—only to turn away in disinterest.

“Wait outside and close the door,” Tertius commanded.

“Sire, your safety is . . .” The guard rumbled, genuinely fearful for his master.

“Is my concern.” Tertius softened his stance. “The clone is well secured. Verify that, then wait outside. I do not intend to step within its reach.”

As the cell door clanged shut, the clone looked up again. There was nothing behind its eyes.

“Prophet of Minerva, speak to me.” He waited for a reaction. The clone looked at its tether, then back to Tertius in confusion.

“I am here to serve you.” Tertius bowed, “Command me.”

Raising its bound hands, it scratched its nose.

Tertius walked inside its tethered range. “Attention.”

The clone stood at attention.

“Left face.”

The clone smartly turned to the wall. Tertius watched it for a few moments before pushing it in the leg with his finger. The clone remained at attention.

“Well, this is useless. Stand at ease.” Tertius sighed, leaving the room.

* * *

Dr. Zuniga waited outside Lord Tertius’s viewing room. In the past two weeks, his life had become a living hell. Before the unexpected transfer of Dr. Trios, Zuniga’s role had been limited to post-Jump interviews, with Trios handling the actual Jump transfers. Now, he had to deal with both. It wasn’t the extra workload that bothered him—hell, the promotion almost doubled his salary—it was the terror of the transfers themselves. He’d never witnessed a failed transfer before and now wished he hadn’t. He just didn’t have the disposition for it.

His prior interaction with the clones was limited to stabilizing the marginal successes, of which there were precious few. He'd never heard of a failed transfer, let alone take part in one. He now had voices of psychotically raving clones creeping into his dreams. They were freaking him out so badly, he was barely hanging on.

He couldn't understand what was happening. During the last three transfer experiments, the clones seemed to know things about him that he had never spoken of, embarrassing things. The last one had mentioned his sister, and how in the hell did it know about his sister?

"Doctor, The Lord Tertius awaits your presence," A civilian they called 'the Major' was IV Hispania's Executive Secretary Kyle Major. He beckoned him into Tertius's ready-room. "You don't look so good, doctor. Are you unwell?"

"It's nothing. I've been having trouble sleeping." Zuniga managed a slight smile, "Thank you for your concern, Major."

Following the secretary down the center aisle of the Great Hall into the ready-room, he was amazed at the place's grandeur. Its soaring ceiling reminded him of an airport terminal. Passing through the sizeable carved oak double doors, the men formally presented themselves to their liege.

The Leprechaun was sitting at a richly finished conference table at the back of the room, decked out like a lounge from some stylish hotel. The litter of reports sprawled out before him served a reminder that no electronic data devices were allowed in any of his legions. The Leprechaun did not even allow note-taking at his meetings, so you'd better pay close attention.

Zuniga had always been amazed by the Leprechaun's keen mind; he seemed to retain everything. He recalled with exacting detail conversations from weeks before, often trapping people with their own words, calling out any inconsistent or misrepresentative statements. Zuniga knew the only way to deal with him was to tell the truth, and hold nothing back.

“Dr. Zuniga, since my return from council, I haven’t had the chance to review the last batch of Jump experiments. Are there any viable Beta prospects?” He looked up from his work, “Why, doctor, you look terrible.”

“Yes, sire.” Zuniga bowed, “I have not been sleeping well.”

“And . . .”

“I’ve heard voices in my dreams, voices of failed clone-Jumps.”

“And what do they say?”

“I . . . I don’t know, sire. I remember only the growling tones, as though a great bull ape was trying to speak.”

“I want to know what they are saying or what you think they’re trying to say. You will keep a record of this.”

“Sire, I . . .” He hesitated. He really wanted out of this job.

“It’s simple, doctor. Just keep a pad of paper by your bed and write down whatever you can remember. I don’t care how unusual or ridiculous.”

The Leprechaun always seemed to look into him, know what was inside—it creeped him out. “Yes, sire.”

“Don’t fret, dear doctor, your role in these Jump-transfers is temporary until Dr. Okeke can relieve you. He is currently at the V Africana finishing up a Beta.” The Leprechaun returned to his reports. “Are there any viable Beta prospects? I mean, recently.”

“No, sire. The Alpha’s fear during transfer seems to give false positives. These alternate voices . . . ah, personalities, seem to have a character all their own. I now agree with Dr. Hamilton that these are not from disassociation and are some kind of emergence.” He did not wish to elaborate any further in fear that the revelations of his past might come to light.

“You’re holding something back, doctor. What is it?”

Damn him. He shifted gears. “You mentioned the V Africana, sire. We have a report that one of their techs has volunteered for a Beta-Jump.”

“Volunteered?” His tone sounded hopeful. The Leprechaun’s eyes narrowed in thought, “What happened to its first clone?”

“Dr. Moss reported that the subject attempted suicide.”

“That’s not so unusual for a Beta. What else?”

“He was trying to promote himself to Gamma.”

“Really? How do we know this?”

“He said as much just before he tried to fall on his sword.”

“Tried?”

“He missed.”

“Not so bright then . . .” The Leprechaun looked to his secretary, “Major, see to it. Notify V Africana that I will be there tomorrow—reschedule everything for two days.”

“Sire.” He knew the order was unconditional.

“I want the Beta-Jump set immediately. Have that, Dr. Okeke attend.” His attention returned, “Dr. Zuniga, since you will not be needed, I want you to take some time off from your duties, see Dr. Wilhauser and tell him of your troubled dreams. Have your report on Lt. Carter’s Alpha-Jump status ready in two days. You are dismissed.”

“Sire.” Zuniga bowed quickly to hide his relief. He hurried out, having to turn his shoulder to avoid running into the approaching day officer.