

Chapter 2

In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatements can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.

—Oppenheimer

Gipuzkoa Province

Basque Territories, Spain

Dr. Markander Downing and Walter Cavic were just returning to the Basque guide Andre's brother's house from a long walk. After the unnerving near-capture in the cave, they thought they needed a drink—they didn't. Markander, not one for drinking, was overwhelmed with feelings of guilt. Walter had tried to remind him that, like grandfather Ostrander, his initial motives for cloning were altruistic and based on therapeutic applications. Markander wasn't so sure, but he was confident that pouring a liquid depressant over the top of his emotions would not be all that helpful.

Switching topics, they talked about yesterday as though a dream. After escaping the troopers and, more importantly, expelling the Asker gamma entity, they had retreated deeper into the cavern complex. Following the tight lava chute Daniel had discovered, they had to be hauled up.

“Lie on your back, and stretch out like you're in a dive, and we'll pull you up.” Daniel had explained, “The streamlet has worn the rock into a smooth groove. In some spots, you may have to hold in your stomach and exhale half your lungs to squeeze by.” He smiled at the more corpulent Walter, “Just don't panic. We have used this route a few times.”

After the last man was pulled up, Andre sealed the chute at its narrowest place with their camp bedding, making it as air-tight as possible. Retreating into the rust cavern, they were all amazed at its size—the lights did not reach the other end.

“What now,” Markander was curious when his light reflected off a vast pool below. “I don’t think you’ll get me to crawl down there.”

“Don’t worry, Doc,” Daniel laughed, flashing his light to a spot on the ceiling, “We’re going up.”

It took most of two hours to rig a pully sling out of the repelling harness to the chute. Two uninjured guides went first to open a way to the surface. Once back, Andre described a few slight bends in the chute that would act as natural resting areas. “It should be a relatively easy climb out before we haul up the wounded.” Sitting around a camp heater, they ate the last of the rations.

“What’s next, Father?” Markander asked. He had just checked on Walter, who was recovering surprisingly well from the cut on his arm.

“The guides have finished laying the ropes for our traverse up the chute. Everybody’s exhausted, so we will grab at least six hours before attempting the climb.”

“Attempting?” Mark sat down next to Daniel.

“Sorry, poor choice of word; it’s a climbing phrase. So tell me, Doc, how’s Walter?”

“He’ll survive the climb if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Not really. How bad’s the cut?”

“Not bad, as the artery was only nicked. Arms sore, but he has partial use. I will stitch it better when we get clear of here.” He looked nervously at the makeshift sling that would carry them to the chute. “That should improve his mood.”

Daniel smiled. “We’ll let two of the guides up first. If there is any sign of trouble, they can handle it. Andre says we should hide out at his brother’s place for a few days. It’s off-grid and far from civilization.”

Markander looked down and nodded, his whole mood tentative.

Daniel smiled. “Look, we’ve been through a lot and have much yet to do. It would be a good idea to get some sleep, though, to keep our focus. We can discuss the situation when we get clear of here.”

“Agreed.” Mark walked over, holding up the Spanish-labeled food pouch. “I don’t know what this is called, but it ain’t bad.”

Daniel and Markander just smiled at each other. The guy was unflappable.

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Keeping to Andre’s idea of a low profile, Walter and Markander approached the cabin through the woods at the foothill’s base. Weaving through the two-mile-long densely wooded path, they heard someone singing, well, more like a lousy recital of a familiar song.

“I ain’t got nobody . . . nobody to depend on . . .”

Markander eventually recognized it as a Santana piece.

“Sounds like one of those weird Shatner renditions,” Walter observed.

“Who?”

“Billy Shatner . . . Captain Kirk.” Walter shot him a look.

“Oh, yeah, kinda does . . . I guess.” Markander had *no* idea what Walter was talking about.

Following the voice, they were surprised to find detective Mark Hendricks leaning against a fallen tree, serenading the forest—three jugs of cider were in attendance.

“Jeez, detective, knock off the racket.” Walter kept his voice low. “I can hear Timberwolves crying, for goodness sake.”

“Well, if it ain’t the famous Walter . . . Walter, what the hell is your last name anyway?”

“Cavic.”

“Cavernic? What kind of . . .”

“Cavic. It’s Serbian, meaning slayer of drunk asses.” He grinned.

Mark laughed, “I like you . . . always have. How’s the arm?”

“The stitches are a little wide, but they’re holding well. Gonna have a nice scar to make up stories about. Any more of that cider?”

“Yeah, Andre’s bro got himself a stash in that-there woodshed of his over dare. Watchit, though—there’s a mean looking coon over in dare.”

“I don’t think coons are indigenous to the Pyrenees, but I’ll check it out; be right back. He headed out for the shed.

“Then watchit,” Mark called out, turning in Walter’s general direction, “There be a mean cat bandit in dare, and I’ll betcha it’s pissed.”

Markander laughed aloud at that. “Probably not as pissed as you.”

“Whoossthat?” Mark slurred, turning his head. “Oh, it’s the famous doctor what’s-his-name—gonna make us all obsolete.”

“Excuse me?” Markander sat on the ground across from Mark.

“Wanna drink, doc?”

“No, thank . . .”

“Can’t trust a man who doan drink.” He held out the jug.

Markander shrugged, and accepting the jug, he took a polite sip. It had a slight vinegary aftertaste. “It’s interesting . . . never had anything like it before.”

Mark shook one of the other jugs, and finding it empty, he tossed it at a rock, missing by a couple of feet. Grabbing the other one, he eyed Markander. “Now, this is how ya drink from a jug, son.” Mark tipped it from the crook of his elbow; some dribbled off his chin. “Gotta know these things to be a detective.”

“How long have you been a detective?”

“Long time . . . long time. How long you been messing with nature?”

“Excuse me?”

“Messing with . . . aww, you know, tryin’ to . . . to do the clone thing?”

“Your drunk detective.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a natural fact.” He began singing again, “Well tweedle dee, and a tweedle dum, look out baby now here I come. Da da da da, get ready, a-get ready, ohh get ready cause here I come, get . . .” He looked up, “Don’t know that one, huh?”

“Sure, it’s the Temptations, great band.”

Mark scoffed, “They’re not a band, man . . . they’re a singing group. Gotta play instruments to be a band, sheesh—everybody knowed that. Besides, it ain’t the Temp’s, it’s Rare Earth, man . . . I tell you,” He took another long pull from the jug, eyeing Markander’s attempt. “No, no . . . like this son,” He tipped the jug twice, again with his elbow.

Markander smiled, mimicking him.

“Atta boy. You know any other bands, or do you just know singin’ groups like dem kids who jump around a lot?”

“Sure, I know a few bands . . .” Markander could not help but be amused.

“Think they got bands out here in this podunk place?”

“I wouldn’t know, detective.”

“Yeah, well, you rich boys probably doan have time fer such things, got important stuff to do like community organizing an-sech.” Mark sneered, then tried to sing. “Got to keep the loonies on the path—know that one?”

“Yes, it’s Floyd: from the dark side album.”

Mark raised his left eyebrow. “We’ll drink to those boys then, now they were a great band . . . not like they knew any country . . . you like country, Doc?”

Markander drank with him. “I thought you were from the city?”

“Naww, just work there.”

They sat in silence for a few moments.

“So, why’d ya do it, I mean . . . how does somebody even *get into* that line of work? Like, ya woke up one morning and decided, ‘I don’t like things the way they are, so I’m guessin’ day’s a good one to mess with humanity’ or somethin’ like that. Or maybe, ‘I got a lot to do today, so I’m gonna make another me ta help out.’ Was it somethin’ like that, Doc?” Mark closed one eye to steady the view.

Walter, emerging from the trees, noticed the look on Markander’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“The detective and I were just having a nice discussion about the different nuances of our occupations.” He took a long draw, “He’s been teaching me the Tennessee side sip.”

“Yeah, Wally. We be discussin’ how impactful our work can be. Hey, ya brought an armful. Now you see, Doc? That there’s a real help to humanity.” He held out his arms to take two of the four jugs Walter brought back. “I think it was ole Benny Franklin who said beers proof God loves us . . . no, that God wants us to be happy. You believe in God, Wally?”

“Boy, I’m gone for ten minutes, and the party’s half over.” Wally raised his eyebrows at Markander.

“How’s about you ther . . . doc-tor, you believe in God? Oh, I forget, you guys probably share an office.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Walter took a log next to Markander.

Markander put a hand on Walter’s forearm. “I think the detective has something he’s been wanting to say.”

Mark stiffened at these words. “You are correct, sir. I wish to apologize for my playful attitude.” He bowed without getting up. “I means no offenses.” Mark drank deeply again.

Markander smiled at this, and after taking a long pull of his own, he pointed the jug at Mark in challenge. “I didn’t know detectives had such slight constitutions.”

Mark looked at him for a long moment. “Ok, let’s play.” Mark drank a quarter of the jug, with Markander following. “What really brings you here, Doc? Fate, or destiny?”

“I thought they were the same.”

“They’re not . . . A man’s decisions can decide his fate.”

“Elegantly put, detective,” Walter rejoined, “What brought you here?”

“Ahh . . .” Mark pointed at Walter, “You can call me Mark, no wait, that’s too close. Call me . . . Marcus. There be enough Marks here to go around. What’s your name?”

“I’m gonna go with . . . Waltharius,” He laughed, “Sounds Romanish enough. And you?” he looked at Markander.

“Let Marcus here decide—he seems to be on a roll.” Markander looked over to Markus, who one-eyed him for a few minutes while periodically taking a swig. Markander matched him each time.

“I . . . got nothin’ doc.” He smiled pleasantly.

“Bullshit, you got something.”

“Can’t think of his name, but he’s the dude that brought down fire.”

“Nero?” Waltharius asked suspiciously.

“No, not that nutjob. The guy that brought fire to the Greek dudes.”

“Prometheus?” Markander offered.

“Yeah, that dude.”

“He’s not a Roman god—he’s Greek.” Waltharius corrected.

“Then, what’s it in Roman?”

“Well, they did rename most of the Greek pantheon.” Walter looked at Markander.

“I have no idea.”

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“Prometheus was not a god—he was a Titan.” Father Daniel announced as he entered the little clearing. “You boys have been making quite the racket.” He laughed, finally noticing Markus.

“Well, somebody looks well-oiled.”

“Danny-boy! Come sit.” Markus enthusiastically pounded the ground next to him. “We’re tryin’ to find a name for Doc-us over dare, some kinda Roman type name.”

Daniel noted the odd look on Markander. “Why?”

“Why not?” Markander raised the jug in salute. “Prometheus, eh? Wasn’t that the subtitle of Shelly’s book?” His expression changed, “Waltharius?”

Waltharius looked down. “Why bring that up?”

“He’s pissed-up too,” Markus pointed at Markander, “I’m not the only one . . .”

“Because it fits grandly, and our friend here has a strong liking for maladroitness.” Markander deftly swept the jug up Tennessee style. He drank deeply. ‘I have myself been blasted in the hope, yet another may succeed.’ He quoted.

Daniel shot Waltharius a concerned look.

“That’s Shelly he’s quoting, I think,” Waltharius noted. Daniel just frowned.

“What? What happens here? Who be this Shelly fellow?” Markus asked.

“Mary Shelly,” Markander answered, “She wrote Frankenstein.”

“Ahhh, I get it, and your right . . . Frankus. It *does* fit.” Mark threw a challenging look at Markander, who suddenly broke out laughing.

“You’re something else.” He wiped tears from his eyes. “To Frankenstein reborn.” They all raised their jugs in salute. “Father Daniel, what’s your Roman name?”

“I’m Roman-Catholic, so the name Daniel was destined to be it.”

“Well, then to destiny’s children . . .” Frankus raised his again, now in somber salute. “Born or grown.” The weight of the past few days suddenly fell like a shroud. “You asked why I am here?” Frankus began. “I am here because . . . because I am supposed to witness the fruits of my own arrogance.” His words were slurred.

“That’s not really fair, is it?” Waltharius countered.

“Then how would you describe these past events?”

“I would . . .”

Markus interrupted. “I’m lost here, gentlemen. How in the hell did you guys actually wind up here?”

“They were called to be here.” Daniel took up the delicate situation. “God has called them here.” He looked directly at Frankus, “The same loving God who does not bring down condemnation without the chance of repentance.”

There was no response.

Markus pressed. “Well, let’s hear it from the horse’s mouth, as it were. Well, Frankus?”

He did not acknowledge him.

Waltharius picked it up, “We were told by this self-proclaimed Messenger of God where and when to meet Father Daniel,” He looked over, “Who happened to call you out by name.”

Markus’s tone was just below snark. “So, if I can understand this correctly. You guys are on a mission from God?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.” Waltharius chuckled at the reference, “I see no mission for us, only that we have been led here to witness some . . . unusual events.” He kept his tone neutral.

“Well, the fact you guys *are* here speaks to the truth of that.” Daniel looked over at Markus, nodding at him to back off. “Over two weeks ago, they were told to meet us here. “Remember where we were two weeks ago, detective?”

“I do. And the people say—Doan, you want to know more? Well, I wanna know how he got into this . . . this thing here that got my ass dragged in over here because of these little experiments of his.” He looked at Daniel, “An *I think* he should, at a minimum, explain what we’re up against.” He sat up with marginal motor control. “Cause I think he’s still holdin’ back.

Daniel held up a hand. “He said in the cave that . . .”

“Yeah, he told us’n all about what happened *after* his little sojourn in Croatia, but not how he got-ta-being working for dem in the first place.” He looked over at Frankus, “How’s ‘bout it therr Frankus, what-say you spill?”

“What does any of that have to do with our . . .” Waltharius stopped.

Frankus had held up his hand. “What is it you wish to know, detective?”

“That’s Markus . . .” He winked at him while holding out the jug.

“Ok, Markus Imreallyus Anassus.” Frankus took an exaggerated swig.

Markus laughed, “I think we finally understand each other, Dr. Frankus.” He toasted him again, “To do my job, I need background on these clones, an’ da only person in the world, being the only person I can readily source, is you, Dr. Frankus.”

“Indeed. Well, you have an interesting way of going about your work.”

“Hey, whatever works,” He shrugged dramatically. “We all got ways.”

“Quite. A set of data discs from Croatia were sent by my grandfather Ostrander, who was the original doctor of cloning op’s for a group called Corvus.”

Markus looked over at Daniel, who just nodded. “Yep, we heard o’ them. Know anything ‘bout them guys when you joined up?”

“Not really, nor did I care. Oh, at first, we thought it might be some foreign government, but it eventually became clear it wasn’t.”

“Yet, you stayed the course,” Daniel stated.

“Of course. Here were the funding and the resources available to accomplish a task believed impossible to do. Think of it detect . . . Markus, if you had dedicated your entire life in pursuit of such goals, would you care about who was funding it? Or even the ramifications? Shit, first they split the atom, *then* they were faced with the moral implications. *I ‘am become Death, the destroyer of worlds*—Oppenheimer.”

“Hey! I know about that guy,” Markus sat up, “He’s one of the boys from the Manhattan project—which began in Chicago by the by, back before they cooked up the first nuc. How d’you know about that quote?”

“Required reading. My step-father Connor was an ardent teacher, also an NWU alum. He would collaborate with some professors to ramp up my studies when I went there. I was even tested differently.”

“Seems kind of unfair,” Waltharius observed.

“Sure, but I took it as a challenge.”

Daniel asked. “You think Oppenheimer understood the ramifications of human’s meddling with the processes of nature?”

Frankus looked at Daniel for a moment. “I do.” He shot Waltharius a knowing look, “But there is another interesting connection here. Oppenheimer used that quote from the Hindu god Krishna. He studied Hinduism but never embraced it, never embraced the idea that the soul could be eternal.” He looked around at the group. “Something, all of us have had recent exposure to.”

“There is another possibility here.” Daniel interjected, “Not to get off-topic, but is it possible these things are malicious spirits mimicking real people.”

“You think that might be a possibility, even after watching Asker’s internal spirit battle that Scarecrow thang in the cave?” Markus asked.

“No, I guess not, using the whole house divided angle,” Daniel admitted.

“House divided angle?” Waltharius asked.

“Yes . . . well,” Daniel sat up. “In the New Testament, it was obvious that Jesus was the Messiah. Due to the miracles he was performing, only such things could come from God—a sign of God’s favor. The Jewish leaders of the Temple rejected this, claiming that this power actually

came from Satan, who was apparently quite active then. Jesus argued that since he was driving out demons with this power, how could it be from Satan? A house divided cannot stand.”

“Ok,” Waltharius added, “So the fact that this Asker was fighting for control of the clone body with these other spirits means two opposing sides.”

“Right you are.” Markus pointed at him, then Frankus, “Hey, you said you got some data discs from your grandfather—how’d he get there? I mean, what drove *him* to the Croatian labs?”

“He was working on a therapeutic cloning project for a company named Hologenesis. This was back in ‘85, so they were all quite ahead of their time. As I understand it, it was leaked to the press that they were using human embryonic cells to experiment with. Although entirely legal, it was considered unethical.”

“Unlike today,” Waltharius had to interject, “Where all parts are considered property until a child takes its first breath.”

“Yes . . . well, back then, Ostrander was publicly scourged for it, and reputation destroyed, he disappeared. I was even told he served some jail time, but that was apparently inaccurate. My father sent a package containing the data discs, a letter, and a lab journal documenting his experiments *and* their eventual failure. In the letter, he stated that three doctors had already been killed for failures, and there was good reason to think he was next. That’s why he wrote the letter and sent the discs.” Frankus rubbed his forehead.

Markus was slowly shaking his head. “And you believe that?” He guffawed.

“Believe what, Markus?” Frankus looked up. “What’s there not to believe?”

“These discs, the ones you studied, that’s what got you hooked, wasn’t it? That’s why you took the job, right?”

“Yes, although the discs had degraded, I saw in his journal that his methods were wrong. The more I thought about it, the more obvious it became that his methods would *never* work. I knew the reality of it the same night I read it. Three months later, I proved it in a makeshift lab I built at university.”

“And you believe that somehow, this Ostrander fellow, living in Croatia of all the back-water dumps, could magically slip a packet into the mail, and his handlers would what? Not notice?” Markus chuckled. “Boy, I think you got more faith in the ‘mysterious ways’ than my pal Danny-boy here.” He playfully nudged Daniel with his foot.

“Meaning what?” Waltharius asked.

Frankus looked skyward. “Meaning that it may have been more by design than some Divine destiny aspect. He’s saying that Corvus sent me the data purposely to lure me in.”

“Bingo!” Markus shot him with his thumb and index finger. “It seems to me, Dr. Frankus, they knew about you from wayyy back.”

“That’s . . .” He cocked his head, “That’s not possible. Both my biological parents were long dead before I even went to school.”

“You told me that the packet was mailed to your father at the VA hospital just before he died.” Waltharius reminded him, “Your foster parents didn’t get the packet until *after* he died. You were already in graduate school.”

“Yeah, but he was in a comatose state. No interaction with the world around him.”

“What happened to him?” Daniel asked.

“Well, where do I start?” Frankus took a deep pull. “As my adoptive mother Kati, Darrin’s sister, ah . . . my aunt tells it, my mother, whose name was Cindy, was part of this Wiccan coven in Milwaukee.”

Waltharius laughed. “How’s that?”

“Cindy, my bio-mom, had been getting deeper and deeper into performing rituals, channeling spirits, and other weird shit.” He looked away for a moment.

“After baptizing me in the tub during some lunar event, Darrin, my biological, finally confronted her. After that, he noticed she was becoming something different. Like someone else was in her, that’s how he described it to Kati. She suffered a grade IV brain tumor that killed her in just six weeks, so Darrin slipped into the bottle, and the Department of Family Services stepped in. After they took *me* away, he slips out of the bottle and into a comatose state. When Cindy’s mental disorder records were finally released, all of her aberrant behavior was attributed to the tumor. Now, in the light of these past events, I’m not sure that’s so.”

“Do you think she was possessed?” Markus asked.

“No. Well, maybe . . . How would I be able to know that, and really, what would it matter?”

“It’s possible a spirit got involved.” Waltharius stated, “Daniel?”

“From what I’ve been told, if she *was* involved in a cult, she was most likely on Satan’s radar as a target. If she was trying to channel spirits then . . . yeah, it’s a good possibility.”

“Are you trying to suggest these events began with my mother’s commitment to a cult?” Frankus was clearly annoyed with the idea.

“I’m not suggesting anything. Waltharius asked me about the possibility of spirit involvement.”

“Yeah, and after what we’ve seen,” Markus interjected, “I’d say his assessment was pretty spot on.”

“Sins of the parent weighed upon the child?” Waltharius directed this to no one in particular.

“Nobody is suggesting that.” Daniel was quick to quash the thought. “The New Covenant with God is predicated upon faith, not works.”

Frankus was unsure. “Oppenheimer makes an oath after Hiroshima that the physicists have known sin, and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.”

Frankus looked at Daniel. “I guess I, too, now know sin.”

“We all do.”