

Chapter 4

Everything which the enemy least expects will succeed the best.

—Frederick II

I Italia Headquarters

Legion of the Black Stone

Sicily, Italy

Sextus Corvinus Aelius, the current CIC of the vast Corvus conglomerate, didn't realize how exhausted he was until exiting the helicopter. Mired in fatigue, it took great effort not to stagger for the first few steps. Waving off his driver, he elected to ride down the mountain trail to the vast estate saddled on Mt. Etna's northern slope. The great black steed Diomedes shivered as the helicopter plunged downslope toward the Mediterranean.

Changing the timeline of Phase One was a monumental task but necessary to meet the prophet's projections. Since the prophet's appearance in council, Sextus's life had been turned upside down. After returning from Legion meetings on three continents, he opted to ride because he needed to feel life again. For him, the quickest way to feel life was to risk it. With the thick mountain air flowing over him, he crossed a small creek before reigning in the steed to take in the majestic view. His mind drifted back to the extraordinary council meeting five days ago.

Rising from the Corvus ranks had taught Sextus much. But none of his experiences had prepared him for the sheer power, the profound force of will, that flowed from the Asker clone now declaring itself the Prophet of Minerva. At the close of the council meeting, Sextus had set off immediately for the VI India Legion to interview the only other known stable Gamma clone. But the trip wound up being a complete waste of time. The India Gamma clone, whose Beta died

from self-immolation, became a raving religious lunatic. Then, at the Parthian Legion headquarters in the Tarsus Mountains of Turkey, Lord Primus poured into his ear that Lord Tertius somehow created the prophet in a grab for more power. He knew this was absurd, but Primus's reasoning *was* alarmingly solid. After his intelligence network discovered another Beta-jump attempt at Tertius's V Africana, Sextus arranged a meeting there. Unfazed by this penetration into his operations, Tertius effectively deflected the meeting by convincing the Praetorian Guard he could not guarantee Sextus's safety. When Intel confirmed that the new gamma had acquired some unusual traits, the meeting was canceled and not rescheduled.

Lost in thought, Sextus prodded Diomedes onward. It's unusual for Tertius to deflect me; I've known him since the Academy—helped him live through it. When Tertius first proposed cloning, I was one of the few who saw the program's multi-faceted benefits. Most people are so prejudiced by his small stature that they can't see the brilliance behind the man, but I do. After all, the cloning project was his vision. In a scant few years, he subsumed Hologensis transferring all its assets, including intellectual property, at no risk to the Empire. It wasn't hard for the council to back him. Then, when the project lead, Dr. Ostrander, took his own life and the cloning project was at a critical point of failure, Tertius found the grandson Markander and revived the project. Now, because of Tertius, cloning is a reality. He looked out at the sky's reflection off the calm water. Getting where I am today would have been almost impossible without his contributions.

And where is that?

In 1989, during the collapse of the USSR, my predecessor decided to take advantage of the global reduction in military personnel to double the troop strength in each of the ten legion zones. He told me that was his destiny, what Minerva had revealed to him, that he was to prepare the Legions for the coming of the Emperor. He was convinced that I would be the last leader of the

regency council and that it was my destiny to usher in New Rome. And I agree. The pieces are set on the table, waiting for the opening move. The prophet's appearance is the sign I've been waiting to make that move. The future of the Empire now rests with me.

The power structure of Corvus is, at heart, a hierarchical oligarchy. Now controlled by twelve legions, each regional zone was headed by a council member. The Regency, or Primary Council, expanded from the original six and consisted of twelve consuls, each with one vote—the leader Sextus holds three. Once voted in, Sextus can only be removed by a super-majority no-confidence vote.

The overall commander of the legions—traditionally named Quintus—selected by Sextus serves as second in command of the Empire. In the event of Sextus's untimely death, Quintus assumes command until a replacement is voted in by the council. This has the added bonus of keeping assassination attempts to a minimum. Each council member controls Corvus's economic and military power within a global zone. New council members can only be recommended by existing or former members

In 1956, when the inexpensive Hercules C-130 air transport became available, four new global trade zones were introduced, and the organization of the Secondary council was created. Due to the expansion of global trading, the Secondary Council maintained all economic interests and international relations. After the cold war, this council became the governing body for all new provinces bound by the Secular State Agreement. Once ratified, a province was assigned a proconsul, the legal liaison between the governor and the Secondary Council. The Secondary Council also arbitrates disputes between Legions and handles all legal and domestic issues within a zone, which greatly expanded its bureaucracy—and the power that came with it.

A Provincial Governor is elected by the Provincial Council, whose members are selected by the citizenry. Only citizens of the Empire are allowed to vote. Citizenship comes through service to the Empire—four years of military or six economic.

As post-cold war militaries continued to downsize globally, the legions attracted highly trained workers with security, good pay, and excellent living conditions. Even with the measured expansion, the addition of the clones was proving to be a logistical behemoth. Fortunately, new markets were helping with the cost.

Walking the horse down the gently sloping trail, Sextus looked towards Greece, imagining the Syrian coast below the horizon. He thought of the history traded over these waters, all the nations that had plied them—none like Rome.

He patted the horse's neck. "You know Diomedes, my faithful steed, at one time, this whole expanse of the Mediterranean was the 'Mare Nostrum' of the Roman Empire—our inland lake." The thought was sobering. His biggest problem with launching Phase One was that none of the five principal zones were at operating strength. Of the 120 projected legions in the ten essential global zones, only 63 were operative, and those legions were at best only at 65% capacity. A Legion's complement consisted of 9,185 men in ten Cohorts and five cavalry troops. The VI Cohort or "Black Cohort" was the clone Cohort; currently under 20% of its 800-man capacity. Due to a severe lack of leadership, no legion had yet to fully integrate clone troopers. Sextus was presently in command of over 375,000 uniformed men underarms. By design, the cost of financing and maintaining these forces was less than a tenth of a modern army.

Corvus did not own military vehicles, planes, or ships. They issued few modern weapons and ammunition. The legions were trained to assimilate enemy assets, military vehicles, and

weapons deployed within their legion zones. Troop training was systematic; the legions were organized into shock troops and police units. One to capture an objective, the other to maintain it.

The commercial side of Corvus was equally immense. Owning majority interest in thousands of affiliated companies, many dating back into the 1st century, that held competing market shares and provided the majority of raw materials and services to intra-corporate companies within Corvus. Traditionally, Corvus maintained an interest in only a few global industries, mostly mining, energy, and transportation. They did not control any banks or deal with drugs or weapons. Consumer markets were the current focus as the emerging Chinese, Indian, and Russian markets were booming. Persian, African, and New Assyrian markets were skyrocketing as consumer marketing was now permissible in areas that had been traditionally closed.

Arriving at the meticulously manicured outcrop, he tied off reins before striding to the viewing area. Sitting on one of the weathered stone benches overlooking the whole of the Roman western coast, he was oblivious to the landscaped fourteenth-century resting area. It was one of those rare days where unobscured air allowed for the coast's detail. I wonder what my predecessors thought when they sat here taking in the immensity of the Med? What problems did they face? What intrigue did they uncover of the many markets and governments beyond their control? Someway, somehow, they all managed it— as I will.

The trail of history ends here. I am the last of the council leaders. New Rome will fulfill her destiny to bring all people under one law, one government, and one Emperor. Answerable only to the triumvirate gods of the Capitoline. As my forefather unified the European tribes, so shall I unify and through unification, peace—Pax Romana. Anxiety over the thought propelled him to his feet. With a last glance at the horizon, he leaped upon Diomedes, who anxiously circled once before pawing at the air with mighty hoofs. Running headlong down the trail, Sextus felt his heart

skip at the challenge of balancing over the horse's top while charging down the loose shale path. The danger was irresponsibly intense. One misstep, one ill-timed weight shift, and both would plunge off the edge, down hundreds of feet to an inevitable conclusion. But both rider and horse were well trained and arrived at the estate unharmed. Initially constructed in the 1st century AD, Corvus's headquarters was designed by the original Sextus. An eclectic gallery of architectural styles added by its many successors, it was the prior Sextus who, at high cost, had wholly modernized the facilities.

Dismounting, he was pleased that the tempest of danger had swept the fog from his mind. Stopping in the entry hall to disrobe, unfamiliar pangs of appetite had him considering some rare treat, an almost taboo idea to his Spartan sensibilities. At the estate's hexagonal exterior foyer, he was met by his Executive Secretary, Sergius Gracchus Aquillius, whose expression quashed the notion of a treat without prejudice.

"Welcome, sire." his bow was held longer than necessary

The formal greeting boded ill news, and the miasma of horse essence spurred Sextus towards the baths. He sat on one of the four stone foyer benches to remove his riding boots.

"Well, don't just stand there gawking—help me off with these."

The comical struggle that ensued ended with Sergius on his backside, holding out the muddy boot as though it were an asp. They both laughed. Effortlessly pulling the corpulent secretary from the floor, Sextus's smile faded.

"What is it now, my dear friend."

Setting the boot next to its mate, Sergius held out a yellow communique. "Here is the after-action report on a joint clone attack by the IV Hispania near Arrasate, Spain, sire."

“Hiam!” Sextus snapped his fingers at one of the female house attendants as she entered the hall. “Bath, tea.”

“At once, sire.” She glided away with her dark hair and grey house robe flying in the steady cross-breeze of the entryway. Her manner contented with his safe return.

“And why should one of Lord Tertius’s field ops be of concern to me?”

“It’s not the op, sire; it concerns the prophet.” Sergius followed him to the baths.

Unfastening his protective outer tunic, Sextus let it fall to the floor. After his exhilarating ride, his mood had been climbing precipitously. He did not want to deal with this right now. “Well then, *out-with-it man*.” He snapped, not too unkindly.

“It would appear that the prophet has left this world.”

“The Asker-gamma has been killed?” He paused to look back before continuing. “How?”

“No, sire. The Gamma clone still lives, only now as a blank. Both the Asker and prophet personalities have been . . . ejected.”

There was a brief synopsis of the action, of which Sextus held no interest in the details, only that the news was over two days old. With his shirt only half off, he grabbed the communique before proceeding into the estate’s inner chambers. Verifying the chemical seal on the communique’s container, he opened it, causing the paper to change color when exposed to air. He handed it back to the trailing Sergius. “You read it, explain it to me, and be brief.” He cautioned him.

Sergius scanned the report. “Sire. In an attack on some priest in a cave outside Arrasate, two entire squads of troopers along with a mixed clone squad were apparently . . . decimated.”

Sextus continued on in silence.

After Sergius had waited the appropriate amount of time, he summed up the report. “All from the IV Hispania. Uh . . . twenty casualties . . . only three soldiers found alive two clone-blanks, one the Asker-gamma.” He scanned the rest. “They had been found bound, equipment and armor gone but not the weapons. They report that this priest had somehow *ejected* his personality but didn’t elaborate as to how he . . .” Sergius looked up. “The survivors of the initial assault were attacked by the two clones, killing many more men.

Sextus nodded. “Expected behavior for riled up clones.” He glanced back at the trailing Sergius. “Almost three whole squads, you say. What was the opposition?”

“Nine in all. Ops identified the following people:

Detective Mark Hendricks: Attached to Interpol UK—prior association

Father Daniel McGinnis: Catholic Priest—prior association

Dr. Markander Downing—Person of high interest

Walter: American—relevance unknown

Andre: Basque guide—relevance unknown

“Four other unidentified guides were also present. Scouts report no line of retreat, physical or electronic—they seemed to have vanished.” He finished, not bothering to read the intelligence agent’s synopsis. He knew Sextus would give it little regard.

“Holy shit, they finally found the doctor.” Sextus paused in the outdoor bathing area, “How in the hell did he wind up in Spain?” Snatching the paper, he scanned for any additional info on Dr. Markander.

“Unknown, sire.”

“Hmm.” Sextus continued to undress as a female attendant quickly scooped up his trail of clothing. “He was the target, I assume. What the hell was the Asker-gamma doing there with a

partial squad of clone-blanks? What was Tertius thinking?” He handed the communique back as he stepped into one of four sunken stone baths.

“The report states that the target was actually the priest. The discovery of Dr. Markander was *entirely* unexpected.”

“So, how is it he came to be there?” Sinking into the hot, slightly sulfuric water, he pushed back his fatigue. The attendant Haim handed him his tea.

“May I wash your hair, sire?”

Coming from an Israeli mother and a father from Brookland, she spoke with an exotic accent. Sextus loved the sound of her. “Not presently, little Haim. I will call on you later tonight.

“Oh, that would be wonderful.” She beamed. “Will it be late?” She gave a petulant frown to Sergius.

“Run along with you!” Sergius playfully nudged her with his foot.

Sextus watched her silken gait for a few paces before settling back into the bath. “Continue, please. You were saying the target was the priest. Why?”

“Unknown sire. To my knowledge, this raid was a follow-up on a prior attempt, which also failed, ending in police involvement.”

“That does not sound like our Lord Tertius.”

“No, sire.”

“How sure are we about the target?”

Sitting down on the soaping bench, Sergius tapped his tablet, scanning for relevant data. “Our man is convinced it was the priest. Apparently, not the Asker clone’s first encounter.”

“No?” Sextus grunted, closing his eyes. This cloning process is far from complete; I did not fully consider the mental ramifications, and I’ll need to rectify that.

“No, sire. The first encounter was at the priest’s church in the Basque region of Spain. Apparently, after some altercation with the priest, he was defenestrated into a ravine. That was the impetus for the gamma jump.”

“The Beta went to see a priest? Were its intentions known, was it stable?”

“Unknown sire, the attending doctor did not log anything unusual with the Asker clone other than the typical DID symptoms.”

“Which means?”

“Unknown. Lord Tertius would be the person best to illuminate that issue.” Sergius paused, waiting for further comment. He continued. “The second attempt to capture the priest was at the church residence two days before the cave assault. Two house guards and three clones were killed in the failed attempt. The trainer was captured by police but died later in the hospital.”

Sextus’s eyebrows made a slight leap. “One of Tertius’s biological time-bombs, I presume.”

“Yes, sire, a coronary embolism from localized fibrous plaque.”

“He’s a crafty one, our Tertius. My guess is that the Vatican is now involved because of the first failed attempt on the priest. What is the probability they know about the clones being tank-grown?”

“There can be of little doubt, now that the good doctor has become involved.”

“Hence the Interpol agent.”

“Yes, sire. He is actually a homicide detective from Chicago. Apparently, he connected two of the clone’s DNA. I have a man tracing him out now.”

“Good. Clones in Chicago, you say. One of Lord Tertius’s loose threads, I assume?”

“Yes, sire. A former doctor of Hologenesis made an Alpha jump to Chicago. Ah . . .” He paused, scanning the data file, “Dr. Lewis was his name. He committed suicide, and there was no subsequent jump. This detective was the investigating officer. Unfortunately, another Lewis clone was found dead in Chicago. The jump sequence was initiated from the Canadian lab, sire.”

“Clumsy of our little Tertius. Why the suicide?”

“Unknown sire. Most likely, the adjustment problem found in most Betas.”

Sextus grunted. “How is it this detective wound up with Interpol?”

“Also, unknown sire. All I have are lukewarm conjectures.”

“What do we know?”

“Not much. Our man in Lord Tertius’s camp has little to go on. Lord Tertius’s insistence on no electronic equipment truncates our intelligence gathering considerably. It was at great risk our man was able to copy this much. If any part is discovered, it would not be difficult for their security to trace the source.”

“Pull your man immediately. I want him debriefed on the clone’s mental condition and current treatment.”

“I have already issued the order.”

“What of your other assets? I know you would not have just the one.”

“I still have one stationed in the cloning facility itself; the other was a house guard killed in the second attempt on the priest.”

“That sounds a little convenient. Is it possible that we’ve been infiltrated?”

“No, sire. It must be a coincidence. Otherwise, we would not even have this.” He rattled the communique.

Sextus mused. “I can’t afford to trust in coincidence. Tertius’s ingeniousness has proven to be beyond measure, and that makes it difficult to counter him—but it also makes him somewhat predictable.” He smiled wryly.

Sergius shifted nervously. He’d seen that look before.

“What of Lord Quintus’s agents?” Sextus closed his eyes. Quintus Corvinus Adolphus was Corvus’s Chief of Military Operations and proconsul of the historically fanatical Germanic Legions.

“I have no contacts there, sire, per your standing orders.”

“Yes, of course . . .” He dismissed the comment with a flick of the wrist. “Request Quintus’s presence for tomorrow afternoon.”

“And the Lord Tertius?”

“Notify all members that an emergency session will be held in two days. In the meantime, find out who gave orders for the cave assault and why—I want to see the mission log—and find out what the prophet was doing there in the first place. He must have left immediately following the last council meeting.”

“Curious that Tertius would bring him to council, declare him as the prophet, and then have him attack the priest.”

“Yes, curious indeed. Have your other man pulled and debriefed as well.” Sextus closed his eyes.

After a few minutes of silence, Sergius stood and walked away.

“Sergius?”

“Yes, sire?” Sergius turned back.

“Have charges drawn up on Lord Tertius for delinquency of command. I don’t want any of this to surface before I have a chance to gauge the council. We’ll meet in the Lupercal, two days from now. Put in a remote conference request to Lord Septimus for 7:00 tonight.”

“Sire?” He did not see this coming, but he knew Sextus as a master at misdirection.

“Inform Lords Octavius and Primus to bring all mission details for the Akyaka Kars assault. They’re to prepare for a briefing to the entire council. When Quintus gets here tomorrow, I’ll need a readiness assessment on the Immortals—inform him of what’s needed.” He turned his head in Sergius’s direction. “Lord Tertius is in a precarious situation.”

“Yes, my lord.” Sergius bowed. “What about Phase One, sire?” His tone held concern.

“We shall see what transpires.” Sextus closed his eyes, shutting off all input except the soothing, swirling water.

Sergius waited. Then, after bowing to his Lord, he smiled and left without comment.