

Chapter 7

Fear comes from uncertainty. When we are absolutely certain, whether of our worth or worthlessness, we are almost impervious to fear.

— William Congreve

Basque, Spain

I Hispania

Legion of the Mountain Pony - Camp II

The Day Officer pressed the entry keypad buttons in sequence before leaning against the far wall and settling down to await a response—it usually took a while. He was surprised when the Leprechaun’s private suite door suddenly opened. Entering the cameo-glass shielded foyer, he was ambushed by music from Strauss’s *Tales of the Vienna Woods*, blaring from the comm speaker. His anxiety increased when the boxed-in entry walls faded to transparent mode. Such a breach of the Master’s privacy was unheard of. Recognizing the danger of the situation, he held his head down, stepping across the threshold to avoid the closing automatic entry door. Self-preservation gave way to curiosity, which ended in gawking amazement. Whirling about the room with one arm raised, the Leprechaun glided effortlessly to the waltz. Unable to pull his eyes away, he muttered.

“Ain’t nobody gonna believe this.”

Having worked hard to dance with grace, the Leprechaun allowed this rare glimpse of his talent. The carefully sculpted mystique he had woven around himself would undoubtedly benefit from this experience as he knew the officer to be a discrete gossip. Besides, he was pleased with himself today because two solid years of precarious scheming had finally come to fruition. Mindful

of his balance, he fluidly changed steps to the music. The best is yet to come, he thought with the excitement of his first kill.

The Hispania Legion's Executive secretary Kyle "The Major" Major, could hear the blaring music from his outer office. The Major sat back, reflecting on his first year as Tertius's Secretary of the Legion. It can only mean one thing, he thought. After two years of planning, Lord Octavious must have finally succumbed to the engineered infection. I lost some of my best agents in that subtle attack, but as Lord Tertius always says—that's what they're for.

It was almost two years to the day when Lord Octavius Corvinus Caecus challenged Lord Tertius in front of the entire Council. "That Greek simpleton had the audacity to call my lord unworthy—in open council of all places." He laughed aloud as the waltz swelled, envisioning Tertius's odd dancing.

We were in a tough spot. The cloning failures had the Council divided, and Tertius's replacement seemed inevitable; there was too much money at stake. The only thing that saved him was maneuvering Ostrander's grandson, Dr. Markander, to reconstruct the research and renew the cloning operation. A brilliant stratagem. Then, after another two years of retooling, Lord's Octavious and Primus mounted another challenge.

After calling Tertius to the floor for administrative incompetence, Lord Octavious produced a detailed report from doctors in six satellite labs indicating that Markander's cloning procedures were not only unrealistic, his methods were unscientific. I remember the look on Tertius's face when somehow they had managed to infiltrate our operations and launched an all-out attack for control.

The Major knew the real reason behind this attack—Octavious was in financial trouble. After assuming command of the Fulminata legions, he was in dire financial straits due to the

protracted war in Syria. Octavius petitioned for some of the cloning project's vast funding by agreeing to convert one of his medical research facilities. After approval from the Secondary Council, Tertius decided. After the first year of operations, it became apparent to Tertius's staff that Octavius's lab was a shell, and project money was funneled into failing companies in Turkey and Syria. When the Major's intelligence services presented hard data to the Secondary Council, the Council denied a hearing, insisting the problem be handled in-house. Then Markander's team accomplished the impossible; a clone batch emerged alive. Malformed, they didn't live long, but it was the breakthrough Tertius needed to expand the project. The Council approved another ten million for lab upgrades. When Tertius denied Octavius his lab share of the funding, their animosity escalated.

In the next Council meeting, Octavius raised concerns over Tertius's mismanagement and incompetence and that with no academic background, Tertius was incapable of grasping the complexities of the project. Producing evidence, he provided excerpts lifted from Markander's journal, documenting his frustrations. One section suggested that Tertius's genetic defects limited his capacity to comprehend complex issues. Since the project was primarily theoretical, most of the so-called evidence was ultimately based on conjecture and unsubstantiated opinion.

The Major recalled the tension in the Council as the members waited for Tertius's response to this attack. Tertius's only answer was silence, which was broken by Lord Onus.

"Do you have anything to say in your defense?" Onus asked boldly.

"I hear no accusations." Tertius calmly replied. At this, murmuring crosstalk began to rise until Sextus called for order.

"Lord Tertius. Could you provide a detailed status report by the next session?"

“Sire, Tertius bowed his head, “The project is at a critical point. I will have it before the Secondary Council meets next week.”

While data was being organized, the Major called for intelligence on who was supporting Lord Octavius. With only one week to mount the defense, the Major was astounded by Tertius’s grasp of the complications in cloning. Other than Lords Primus and Septimius, it would take more than just three in open Council to mount the attack.

Primus came up with the idea to enlist young Lord Onus’s four council member bloc. As part of the newly expanded Council, they formed a voting bloc to counter the more entrenched primary members who often resisted their modern methods. Convincing these four young secondary council members that the project was never meant to succeed or, better yet, impossible to achieve was reasonably straightforward. They pitched it as a ruse created by Tertius to gain financial power. After all, in just a few short years, did not Tertius rise from nothing to command three of the most highly subsidized independent legions?

They argued that the real value was in the intellectual patents the project was producing. Besides, was it not their hard-fought contributions to the Empire that provided the funding? Therapeutic cloning alone was worth a fortune. Once Tertius was out of the way, they could form a coalition and benefit handsomely from the profits. The only difficulty remaining was convincing Sextus that the project could not succeed. Since it was a legacy project for him, all they had to do was show incremental progress, milking it for all it was worth—and it was a big tit.

Octavius knew he had at least an 8-4 advantage. Even if Sextus’s three votes went against them, Quintus’s disapproval of the entire cloning project would cancel one of those out. So, with an almost guaranteed victory in mind, the triumvirate launched their attack.

Since the whole project was the brainchild of Tertius, only he knew the relevance of the facts presented. His defense was brilliantly simple—he reminded the Council of those facts. He began with the successful takeover of Hologenesis, the placement of Ostrander to design the initial labs, and finally, the success of Dr. Markander. Tertius finished by showing them just how close to viability the project was. For many on the Council, it was an extensively detailed reveal of the shrouded cloning project.

Onus's voting bloc split with Lords Decius and Nonus voting against dismissal. Through his unwavering support for Sextus, Quintus reluctantly voted against removal, and the vote swung 7-5 in Tertius's favor. With a recommendation by the Secondary Council, funding was substantially increased within the following year, and two satellite labs were added. Decius and Nonus were awarded one each.

As the Waltz approached the zither virtuoso section, Tertius slid from view into the gallery room. "I am what I'm becoming." He recited the mantra drilled into him by his father—it was also the code phrase that unlocked the wall.

After sliding back, the wall opened, revealing his private gallery of family oil paintings. Striding in, Tertius felt the familiar rise of anxiety as the eyes of his family followed him. Tenuous bonds held portraits of love, rejection, placation, and honor. When proud, he would stand before his mother, when angry, his father. He would sometimes converse with a sibling's painting, confessing his doubts or fears to his sister or to a brother. Today, he stood before his father in silent contemplation. As he held his left thumb on the portrait's right eye, a sensor opened the painting, revealing a hidden safe. He took a booklet out before returning to the main room. It was a dossier on the current T1 or EO—Executive Officer—of the Fulminata legions, First Tribune Stathos. A

deep-cover mole. Lord Tertius finished his dance with the fading note of the twelve-minute waltz as the protective foyer walls slid noiselessly into the floor.

The timing was not lost upon Jurek, who saluted smartly.

“Report, Lt. Jurak,”

“My lord,” The officer bowed, “Flash signal from the First Italia, sire.” He held out the communique.

Snatching the message with surprising fluidity, he glanced at the day officer before turning on his heel.

“Remember, all is not lost, laddie, if t’ere be proper opportunity to act.”

“Yes, sire.” Jurek nodded in understanding, even if his tone suggested he didn’t.

“Pass the word for the T2.” Second Tribune Mari, his head of intel, was one of six females on his legion staff and, as such, one of his more trusted advisors. After reading the message, he had to center himself. So, it’s to be a special council meeting. It was ill news that Sextus had called a special council. He knew this must be about the prophet, for they had no idea who poisoned Octavius. Thinking back on the elegant solution to Octavius, a smile crept into his disquiet.

Octavius was poisoned by his own appetite. Indulging his favorite *un goûter*, ironically, Coffin Bay King Oysters, which had almost ten times the meat of a regular oyster, made them the perfect vehicle. Replacing his supplier’s shipments with genetically engineered oysters that would only cause a mild reaction in others proved fatal to Octavius. It was virtually undetectable and untraceable.

It was a stroke of genius by the former Hologenesis Director, who took over the research center in Chicago after the previous owner committed suicide. The same director had framed Dr. Ostrander, causing his fall from grace. Before Ostrander’s untimely suicide, security intercepted a

packet he tried to send to his son Darren in a VA facility in upper Wisconsin. The package contained copies of all the doctor's data and his journal.

That was the real break; Tertius smiled. I didn't know Markander even existed. Maybe not as bright as Ostrander, but better trained. It was simple to ensure the journal got into the right hands—funny how things work out. Markander thought destiny brought him to the Croatian labs. Maybe he's correct.

Tertius thought of his own destiny and the visitation from Minerva. She vowed that if he dedicated himself to Corvus, he would rise to power beyond comprehension. That was over thirty years ago.

Tertius commanded approximately sixty-three companies spread out over six or seven economic regions—he didn't know for sure. He also commanded three partial legions comprising nearly 28,000 men in uniform. But unlike that weasel Octavius and his verminous triumvirate, I do not give my allegiances lightly. There are few options for a man of my stature in this world, and only through Corvus can I obtain my rightful place. Besides, the organization will be stronger without the inept administrations of those three who, through dissension, deception, and dissidence, only weaken the collation. I had to act because Sextus could not. The whole Council would divide if his hand was discovered in the affair, and a civil war would erupt between the legions. Again.

Climbing out the window onto a custom perch overlooking the valley below, Tertius allowed his objective focus to withdraw. The imagery began to flow freely. He began to "see" the problems with eliminating his next target: Lord Primus Corvinus Astraeus, leader of the Parthian Legions.

Primus's Parthian zone, comprising Southern Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, reinforced the Fulminata's economic legions in Octavius's efforts to unite regional Assyrian, Azeri, Kurdish, and Georgian leaders and Yazidis ethnicities inhabiting the Fulminata zone, which comprised of the autonomous regions of Turkey, Armenia, Syria, Iraq, and northern Iran to the Caspian. Last year Octavius's diplomatic corps managed to get the autonomous region commanders to the table by creating and backing a new state known as the New Assyrian Territories.

As zone commander, it fell squarely on Octavius's office to get the NAT council to sign the Secular State Agreement—SSA—joining the Corvus Empire. The SSA was a constitutional document guaranteeing the religious impartiality of the Province. It also contained fundamental rules for the governing of political power, as well as a judicial system to arbitrate conflicts. The people of the Province would now be protected by the Empire and pay taxes for that protection. There was the added benefit for the people to sell food, materials, and personal sundries to the Legions of that Zone.

Legion scrip was issued to all Corvus personnel and was the only currency allowed on Legion property. Lucrative trade contracts, backed by the Empire, were required to pay the vendor's scrip based on Legion currency standards. The legion scrip was strong against most currencies. For purchases off base, currency exchanges were available with rates set by Corvus. Inter-legion commerce was also paid in Corvus scrip, as was all business in the Provinces. Realizing that this currency was more valuable than local scrip was one of the key advantages of signing the SSA.

A soft rap on the wall brought Tertius out of his musings. "Ah, Mari," He smiled at his T2, "Come and share this spectacular sunset with me." She climbed out onto his platform.

“You do me too much honor, my Lord.”

Captivated by the panoramic view of the distant Bay of Biscay, her eyes watered, blending the ocean sky into a raft of color. They were silent for many minutes.

When the colors muted, Tertius spoke softly. “I ran across a Gauguin in Seville I thought worthy of your collection. It’s obscure, but I thought it might please you.”

“I fear at times your generosity is unwarranted.” She bowed slightly.

“Nothing of the sort. Your efforts should be rewarded.”

They sat watching in silence as the final breaths of light faded away.

Mari slowly exhaled a contented sigh. “I have completed my assessment on the Parthian Legion and our next move.” She nodded to a servant who had brought some tea and a small charcoal brazier, smoking with citronella oil. “It won’t be easy now that he’ll be looking for the attempt.”

“I know; I’m counting on his caution.” Tertius’s face was glowing eerily in the red light of the brazier. “What about the NAT?”

“You still think that’s an option?” She did not disguise her surprise. “You, of course, realize that Sextus must stand against you. If he doesn’t, he could lose the Council’s confidence.”

“Yes.”

Mari heard faint irritation in the comment. Tertius’s scheming to subsume the Fulminata Legions was proceeding brilliantly until the unexpected rise of the prophet put a wrench into his well-tuned plans. To further complicate things, the prophet disappeared just as suddenly as it appeared. Driven off, ejected, or outright destroyed—she had no idea—its reemergence is yet to occur. But no matter what Tertius is responsible for, Sextus will want answers. Answers she knew Tertius didn’t have.

“Any news from the High Lord about Octavius?”

“Yes, I just received his notice to appear.”

“So, it’s a special council meeting, after all. Forgive me, lord. As I feared, your friendship is too expensive for the High Lord. Even if he gives you partial control of the Parthian region, Lord Primus will surely sway the bloc against you, and this time they won’t split.”

Tertius let that hang as he considered the problems in the new region. “The key log is getting the SSA signed and ratified. Four of the six Australian legions coming online are assigned to the area. This alone will instantly make the leader of the Fulminata one of the most powerful men on the Council—something Primus is well aware of. Octavius’s recommendation will weigh heavily on the Primary Council’s decision—rarely do they go against legacy—and Primus will be instrumental in that choice. The key is Myles Stathos.”

Mari’s eyes narrowed as she recalled her data on Captain Myles Stathos. He was the former T5, or CMO—Civilian to Military Operations officer—of the Parthian legions. When the T1 for the Fulminata legions retired in ’23, Primus had lobbied for Stathos to replace him, and Octavius agreed. As T1, Stathos had done a remarkable job recruiting and organizing legion forces for combat operations. Then, when Alber Gaius, the Fulminata’s T2 Commander, discovered the location of some highly classified machine in Akyaka Kars, Tribune Stathos was called on to devise its capture. This machine, declared vital to the Empire by Sextus, was to be secretly captured and transported to the Fulminata HQ deep within the Tarsus Mountains. All her attempts to gain intel on the machine had failed. And that pissed her off.

“Is this about the machine and the Akyaka Kars raid?”

Tertius smiled. “In part. If the raid is successful, Stathos will be chosen to lead the Fulminata Legions.”

“I would be helpful, sire, if I knew what the machine did.”

“Be patient, Mari. That information is classified as need to know.”

“What do you want me to do about Stahos, sire?”

“I want your team to infiltrate the Parthian diplomatic corp. I need to know what is happening with the NAT. How close are they to signing the SSA.”

After his T2 left, Tertius turned his thoughts to Pvt. Munroe. Reports had been flowing in that he was getting more powerful each day. Yesterday, the Fifth’s Commander in Syria reported him speaking in Bantu-fang. The guy’s from Australia, for Pete’s sake. He thought about what he had witnessed from the spirit during the Munroe Beta-Jump. The interchange with Okeke had fascinated him. Munroe’s spirit is not the Scarecrow, but I’m ill-prepared at best if it’s anything like him. The sooner Munroe is sent off to Turkey, the better. I must get this all under wraps, or things will rapidly spin out of control. I can ill-afford the scrutiny the Munroe-Gamma’s power will bring. What is the source of that power? “That’s the question of the century,” Tertius voiced on his way to the comm center, “How can I manipulate it?”

Entering the data wing, he nodded at the guardsmen’s salutes. I must stay off the spiritual radar. Let Wilhauser’s team handle that, even though he’s becoming Christian. Well, that’s why I’m bringing in Okeke.

From the incidents in the cave, the Asker-Gamma’s controlling spirit was defeated by that priest. As to how? That is the million-dollar question. He refused to believe that just by using this name, a name he wouldn’t even think of—let alone vocalize. Somehow, only by invoking that name, the prophet’s spirit was driven off. He paused at the door to the comms room. I wonder what became of the Asker personality. Was it destroyed?

Entering the dimly lit comm center, the massive U-shaped desk occupying most of the room still astounded him. Surrounded by myriad white data tubing that fanned out like antennae, a bizarre-looking silver creature with a mirrored face sat in the center. A large bank of video storage drives covered the side walls behind thickly insulated glass doors, with metal C-channel conduits connecting each bank to the desk. On the far wall, four-telepanel 3-D flat screens displayed blurred shifting images. Tertius recognized the geothermal project array on the top left panel.

Tertius hated this room. It was the only room in the entire legion he allowed outside connections. The Secondary Council's appropriations division required image logs for all empirically funded projects to be sent periodically. Though none of the image storage drives were directly linked to the outside, a gate connection was needed, which made the system vulnerable to outside attacks.

"Watch-officer," Tertius shouted above the whine of cooling fans.

"Sire." A mechanical voice emanated from desktop speakers as the man nodded his acknowledgment. As Tertius walked to the front, he almost laughed. The man's face was totally covered in what looked like a futuristic welding mask without the eye-slit. Clear-fiber tubes spread out from the top of the headgear.

The VR interface, an invention VII India came up with, produced computer imagery that was both aural and olfactory. They developed a way to pass odors through varied membranes that could digitally register molecular size. A series of molecular compound tanks reproduced the smells when replayed in sequence. It wasn't very accurate, as the database was only up to around 3,000 compounds, but it was a start.

“Send word to the V Africana; I want Dr. Okeke here in two days. Arrange a flight to Corvus headquarters by 0800;. Second, compile all diplomatic corp communique between headquarters and the Fulmanata legion over the last two weeks. Next, copy all security tapes involving Dr. Trios from his last jump experiment forward. Copy file,” he read a number from the vault booklet, “and include current operations planning for the Akyaka Kars raid. Also, files #GK458Y2P35-025 thru 036. I will take this data with me.”

“I will immediately transfer those to your port drive and notify the day officer Lt. Jurak of the flight, sire.”

“If I wanted anyone else to know my departure time, I would inform them myself. Do you understand?”

The mask nodded slightly. The system didn’t fully translate the ramble of apologetic noises. Only the last word, “sire” was somewhat intelligible.

“Good.” Imagining the look on the man’s face under the VR mask brought a slight smile to his lips as Tertius strode out.

It’s the little things that lighten the burden of command.