

Chapter 8

Wise leaders generally have wise counselors because it takes a wise person themselves to distinguish them.

—*Diogenes*

Isle of Sicily, Mt Etna

I Italia - Legion of the Black stone

Corvus Headquarters

On the helicopter back from the special council meeting in the Lupercal, I Italia's Executive Secretary Sergius presented the High Lord Sextus a recently procured copy of the Arrasate mission log from Lord Tertius's headquarters.

"I received this during Council, sire."

"Well, this is certainly interesting," Sextus said into the headset. "So, it was the Asker-Gamma that ordered the cave assault. Why then, at Council, did Tertius claim it was his orders?"

"Unknown sire," Sergius replied reflectively, "It was odd that the orders were never confirmed by command—the troopers just launched the attack."

This is not good, Sextus thought after rereading the message. "Why waste time on a priest that could have easily been captured and brought in?" Sextus vocalized the internal thought. "An unfortunate set of circumstances."

Sergius did not reply to the rhetorical.

Lost in thought, Sextus looked out over the expanse of the Mediterranean. The emergency session did not go well. Primus had motioned to censure Tertius, arguing that due to his recent failures, cloning operations have not only been exposed to the Church but now to Interpol. There

are now a series of reports surfacing on the Church investigating property deeds of several Corvus holdings. I blocked Primus's motion because it doesn't really matter. That Croatian doctor did escape with the clone, and his reappearance in the cave suggests the clone is already safe in someone's hands. It will take them a while to figure out what they're dealing with, and in three days, Phase one will give the world plenty to think about.

Why is Tertius protecting the Asker-Gamma? Unlike VI India's Gamma, it appeared stable and coherent, but perhaps that's not the case. Reincarnation messes with reason; it's the central consistency in these clones, so why would this be any different? Because it is. You saw it—the whole Council witnessed it. The prophet manifested itself in Tertius's Gamma, revealing its nature through revelation, and then somehow got its ass expelled—I need more. What are you hiding, my little friend? There's been much speculation on the prophet's legitimacy. But there's no way the Asker-Gamma clone could have been couched. The self-proclaimed prophet must be as it says it is. It spoke of things only I could know. When Quintus challenged its authenticity, he was met with brutal truth. Not only did it know his real name, but it had accurately described the dedication strangling of his own brother. Something even I was unaware of. It also detailed our operational plans, even down to the religious attacks, which only Quintus knew of.

He looked out into the horizon's haze, consciously quieting his mind.

And yet Minerva remains silent, revealing nothing. Phase one is in motion. I dared not stop it or risk exposing our plans. Is that it? Is this a test? If it is, I must act without full reason. I must take it on faith. He shifted nervously, glancing at Sergius, who was watching him closely.

“Yes?”

“I was just thinking, sire.” Sergius looked away for a moment. “When the prophet reappears, can we trust it?”

That question would plague Sextus's thoughts for the rest of the day.

Curtained with insect netting, Sextus was lying in his large four-poster canopy bed. Awake for almost an hour, he sat in the dark, listening to Haim's deep breathing. Only by willing himself away from endless speculation did sleep finally come. In his dreams, he flew over fertile plains landing momentarily to check on a plant's growth before continuing on to the next field. It was a reoccurring dream. Rolling onto his side, he opened the translucent fiber curtain to watch for the dawn's gloaming as he contemplated Phase One. Knowing everything was set, there was nothing to do but wait.

"Patience is meant to be trying." He chuckled at the old maxim.

Getting up to face the day, he stepped into the marble bath's rain shower. Sitting on the stone bench under a steady lukewarm stream, Sextus mentally reviewed the data from yesterday's special session. Corvus's military currently consumes about fifty-three percent of the current operating budget. After port deployment, that number should shrink by at least two-thirds. The cloning operation is presently consuming about twelve percent. After the cloning operational infrastructure is completed, that number drops by at least eight points. Income is well above projections, and we're not even close to anticipated expenses.

He bowed his head in thought, comforted by the warm water cascading off his scalp. I know resuming the clone-jump experiments is right, he thought, looking but not seeing the swirling drain water. Time passed as he let his subconscious flow.

This year will post the most substantial surplus of Corvus's long history. Quintus's Immortals will serve as a powerful weapon and an intel asset. In just eighteen months, we can grow a duplicate, kill the Alpha, and interrogate the agent post-jump, all from just one

undifferentiated cell from a targeted agent. But *only* if Tertius's cloning ops can manage to stabilize the Jumps.

He paused, searching his face in the mirror. "Where do you stand with your old friend Tertius?" He saw the finality in his own features. You know there is little choice—the Council wants his head.

Quickly shelving it, he left the room.

With the expected demise of Lord Octavius, and now perhaps Tertius, I have little choice but to try and balance the power. Seven new legions are scheduled to come online this month, but the command structure isn't there yet. He sighed. There couldn't be a more inconvenient time for the Fulminata command structure to collapse in disarray. The only way I can stabilize that region is to get the SSA signed immediately. Only then will the infighting stop.

He knew Octavius's replacement would be caught up in the inevitable inner-legion political tug-of-war in which Sextus ultimately would have to intervene directly. Expansion in that region was in jeopardy, threatening the timeline and unbalancing the Council. Once he'd assigned two Parthian legions into the Fulminata zone from the south, there was a real risk of a take-over by Primus. To counter that, he intended to give command of the III Parthia legion to Tertius, but that was now off the table. He needed to shake up the command structure.

"It's imperative that the attack on Akyaka Kars launch on schedule." He declared softly. "And who's to lead it?" Sextus stopped at the exterior doorway as a cool breeze passed unnoticed over his naked frame.

Octavius's illness has set the whole Council on edge. These attacks on Tertius have substance, and three councilmen have already asked for his head. Thankfully, the bloc is staying neutral—they know better than to force *my* hand.

Damn you, Lucius. Something's happened that's driving you. I've never seen you like this—so many missteps. Sextus used the Leprechaun's private name. Now that I think about it, you were a bit squirrely when you brought the Asker-Gamma to Council. At first, I thought you were just overly deferential, but now it seems you may have been running scared—if that's even possible. Did the prophet reveal itself to you before the council meeting? Why else would you introduce it without approval? Absently wandering out of his bedroom, he paid little heed to the cold, damp stone of the three-tiered veranda that overlooked the Tyrrhenian sea.

Something is happening with these clones; nobody knows them better except maybe our wayward Croatian doctor. I look forward to meeting this Markander. He smiled. Now that's a noble name. Sextus strode carelessly over the darkened terrace as swaying branches obscured the moonlight, but he knew the grounds well. His senses automatically adjusted to the surroundings as his mind worked out the problems replacing Tertius.

Tertius's underdeveloped legions are spread out in three countries—all cloning ops. I can redistribute command to the regional commanders or divide them between Lords Decius and Secundus, but then I'd have to give Lord Quartus command of sector-two port operations and leave the inland raids to Primus on top of his over-loaded port operations—I may have to move his command. At least twelve entire legions will need to be committed, maybe more. Quintus will want control over the Black Sea landing assaults, but he's already stretched way too thin. The closure of the Baltic is a vital factor. We must shut down the off-shore terminals by D+3.

Sextus returned to the bedroom to dress. Light linen slacks had been laid out for him, along with his black, Egyptian cotton, open vee Nehru shirt. Dividing command into two spheres is not optimal but might be the best option. Quintus and Septimius can handle the Akyaka Kars assault

and get the weapon to the Tarsus Mountains. To maintain the schedule, Quartus must work two sectors hundreds of miles apart.

This attack on Octavius has all the makings of an internal assassination attempt, but something tells me it wasn't. Regardless, I need to send four more legions into that area. They could use more, but the remaining three legions are already committed to bulking up the Hispania. Tertius's Secretary is the obvious choice to replace him. Damn that dwarf, what else can he screw up?

Now fully dressed, he walked to the oversized stone railing above the eastern garden. Intricate shades of green slowly emerged in the coming of the dawn. Shit. Tertius was the perfect foil to counter Primus's ambitions, but I fear the Council would misread my intent. The next man up in the Fulminata Legions command chain is a former Tribune of Primus, who's a poor choice if Primus really *is* trying to subsume the Fulminata. The toxicology reports suggested it was an engineered bacterium in the oysters that made others sick but was only fatal to Octavius—a hard thing to prove. Sextus shook his head. Of the shortlist, only Tertius could be that elegant. “Well, my little friend, how in the hell did you pull *that* off?” He spoke into the morning sky, making a mental note to have his food sources rotated out.

Truth and loyalty are the cornerstones on which this Council has survived centuries of trials and tribulations. Any breach of these warrants immediate termination, with all legion and financial assets redistributed. It's only happened a handful of times. But it does happen, always followed by the inevitable positioning for power, as factions vie for control of the divested economic zones. It's bad enough that every member is already competing for the new legions—they all see what's coming.

Looking out at the majesty of the Mediterranean, he considered the two-thousand-year-old legacy that was coming to fruition. Since his own visitation from the goddess Minerva twenty-six years ago, the legacy had ruled his life—consumed him. Every waking thought, every decision, underwritten by this commitment. *Minerva . . .* Sextus pondered the implications again. What has the prophet revealed to that dwarf? What promises were made, and who do I trust? He considered how the past events could fit together. What he's accomplished has been truly remarkable. Nobody saw the jumps as a possibility. Corvus owes a lot to the little man; I owe him a lot. How do I retain him without the Council's backing?

The answer is simple, I don't.

Stepping down onto the middle tier, he sat in one of his favorite spots to watch the sunrise over the Med. The setting was a duplicate of the hot spring in Greece known as Thermopylae—its meaning was not lost upon Sextus. Never surrender to hopeless conjecture; it darkens the mind. Listening to the spilling of the sluice gate, he watched the steam rise languidly off the collecting pool. Closing his thoughts, he allowed himself to be cleansed by the moment's tranquility. Clearer now, he considered the legacy of Corvus, a legend passed on to him by his predecessor. Validated in a waking dream by a raven that morphed into a beautiful woman, Minerva told him of the prophecy.

In AD 96, arguably the height of Roman prosperity, Emperor Domitian—third in the Flavian dynasty—was visited in a dream by the Flavian House god Minerva. He was told of the eventual collapse of the Roman Empire by an idea that would wrest the Western world from Rome's grasp. The idea arose from a small group of worthless lowborn peasants and enslaved people who would eventually captivate Rome's elite families; and, ultimately, the Emperor

himself. Expanding into a powerful organization, it unified people from all social classes into a single Church, a Universal Church that would entirely subsume mighty Rome. Domitian was to begin building for the time when this new organization's power would invariably wane.

The Guardian Minerva, a member of the divine Capitoline triad known as the Guardians, instructed Domitian to lay the foundations for Rome's eventual reemergence from the fringe provinces. Apart from the Empire, they would not get caught up by the rising church.

The Roman tradition of deifying Emperors had been posthumously bestowed by the Senate. Domitian was the first emperor to declare himself a god—not even Nero considered that abomination. As the penalty for declaring himself a god, Minerva prophesied that he would be betrayed by someone close to him and die within the year, and the dynasty would die with him. Minerva gave him only one condition where he might avoid an eternity of torment in damnation if he agreed to her terms and saw its successful implementation. She promised to petition her father, Jupiter—the Roman equivalent of Zeus—to spare him this fate. Informed of his impending demise, the now-inspired Domitian wasted no time. He needed to start immediately while he still held power

He called on Sextus Aurelius, the leader of Vespasian's financial guild, which was already established outside Roman political influences and unknown to her bureaucracies. Aurelius at first refused, citing his lack of authority in the Empire. Domitian then gave him six coins bearing House Flavian's imperial insignia. With these metal signets, these charagma, the bearer would have the total authority of the Emperor to borrow money, impose upon governors, and travel freely without expense. To seal his compliance with Minerva, Domitian renamed the Guild Corvus, Latin for raven, after House Flavian's augury bird. For the next four hundred years, the charagma were honored by Emperors and politicians alike as Corvus's web stretched out into the world.

“Sire,” Sergius materialized as though an apparition, “Pardon my intrusion, but I’m pleased to inform you that all Phase One strike elements have reported in.” He set down a tablet containing the mission brief.

“Very well, you may give the word.” He didn’t look at the tablet.

“Yes, sire.” Sergius bowed, “Is there anything else, sire?”

Sextus waved him away. After a few moments to shift gears, he scanned the mission brief. He was interested in how Quintus’s Immortals would work out in their first test. Distance-wise, it was the longest jump yet attempted. The lab at the III Fulminata would report if any of the four men emerged and if they did, would they be sane? He wondered if mental capability had any play in the success rate of a Jump. From the reports he read about Asker, his mental acuity had *actually increased*. I need to look deeper into this. It’s been less than two months since the first Jump in Croatia occurred, and the reliability of these . . . what, soul transfers? are still chancy at best.

He absently watched the sun’s colors brush across the sky, the magnificence of it lost to his musings. When the first stable Gamma transfer occurred, the prophet-entity appeared. He wondered which came first. Did the entity prepare Asker by making him sane, or did it enter a stable gateway? The gateway argument made the most sense. However, after Asker’s Gamma Jump, it became emboldened to the point of insubordination, like he was challenging authority from a new paradigm. But, other than the obsession with the priest, this one’s acuity has enhanced. Did the entity somehow precondition Asker? Make him stable? When the entity *was* expelled, the Asker clone did revert back to its initial mindless state. So what makes the connection?

The VI India’s doctor believed the spirit transfer is centered on religious conviction. However, even considering their pre-jump ritual, they still could not produce a single stable

Gamma. Of their six devoted Alphas, they got one Gamma. Two failed jumps, the last three euthanized because of instability, and the Gamma? A religious nut, spewing out nonsensical doctrine.

So, again, what's the connection?

I read Asker's file, and he was anything but religious, but he did claim Catholic training had helped. And what became of Markander's Alpha-clone? It could not have suffered from the same level of insanity, or they would have found it. Shit, I need answers. Abruptly reversing an earlier plan, he paused in thought. "Call for Sergius." He spoke out to one of his unseen male guards.

"Sire." He heard the confirmation from somewhere above him.

Sextus had learned about Quintus's violent reaction to Markander's reappearance—it was quite the deep cut. Quintus had boasted that the doctor would be quickly rounded up long before leaving Croatia. The good doctor apparently had lots of help, but from whom? Who could have killed those mercenaries on the Pelješac peninsula? Undoubtedly not one used-up doctor transporting a partially insane clone. Staring into the collecting pool with the forefront of his awareness, he noted the reflection of the rising sun enhanced by the sulfurous water's patina. He considered the effect. If the prophet's spirit was overlaid on the consciousness of Asker, then what happened to Asker?

The psych reports indicate that with DID or MPS—Multiple Personality Syndrome—the separate personalities are present in the same body. However, the prophet's personality was not discovered at first. It seemed to surface later. Could this be some ploy by Tertius? No, the revelatory knowledge displayed by the prophet is irrefutable. Tertius couldn't have known this and passed it on. Or could he? All magic is deception. No matter how implausible, Tertius may have

learned of Quintus's ritual killing. The only proof of the prophet's legitimacy can come from Minerva herself—and she's been strangely silent. Her last known visitation was to Tertius before his elevation to Council. These events all seem to have Tertius at their center. And then there is Markander, clever of Tertius to lure him, but then again, he always was.

Why let a Gamma run the mission op? He, of all people, should know they are not stable. Tertius is, however, known for misdirection and subterfuge—he's no fool. Unless, perhaps, Minerva is behind all this. If it weren't for the past, I probably would have eliminated that dwarf already—he's too damn clever. Besides, maintaining old friendships is a luxury I can ill afford, a costly lesson I've learned.

He noticed the sun was now fully up. The day would be hazy and thick. A thought struck him so suddenly that he voiced it. "What if Tertius has already captured the Doctor?" He immediately discounted the notion; Sergius's spies would know. Do I still have your confidence, my little friend? You still have mine, but not as head of the Council. Lies can only foster distrust.

Leaving the melancholy of the hot springs, he stepped down a spiral stone stair to the mid-tier, large shale-stone patio. Taking in the vast expanse of the azure seascape, he focused on a distant freighter plying its way toward Rome. Shielding his eyes, he glanced up, noting the sun's position. It was already growing hot.

How do two fully equipped squads get defeated by a ragtag group of tourists and guides? There's an element going on here that makes no sense. Why is it that these spirit transfers are so rare? Is it a matter of will? The issue hounded him, and there was much to do. He suddenly felt small in the panoramic setting of the Mediterranean.

"I am the center of my being. My will propels me."

Renewed, he searched for the central connecting issue for any implications from direct action; seemingly, there were none. He strode across the patio, feeling the odd hard/soft texture of the water-polished shale on his bare feet. He wondered about the party in the cave and who was directing them. It must be that old dotard Arazola. Nobody else in the Vatican is bright enough. Could Arazola have had prior knowledge of the Croatian lab? No, not possible. So then, how does Markander suddenly appear on the scene? Now that this Archbishop Bechou is nosing around legion properties checking land titles, they will preoccupy themselves with useless activity. He can do nothing with what he doesn't know and can do little with what he does. Is Quintus right? Should we eliminate Bechou? His persistence is becoming meddlesome, but perhaps it's better to keep him alive than deal with an unknown replacement. It's Arazola I'm worried about. Has Markander been debriefed by Bechou? I would have, but does it matter? No. He has little to work with. The events currently in motion cannot be affected by the Church, no matter what they think they know.

I'll never understand why they let those idiot legionaries in the cave live when they could have slipped away without revealing anything. That Interpol agent wouldn't have let them go; he killed those House Guards quickly. They play by rules, not of their own making. Ultimately that will be the difference,

He suddenly laughed. "They have no clue as to what's coming next."

"Sire?" Sergius was suddenly behind him.

Sextus looked up at the sky. How does he do that? "Yes, my good, Sergius. Have Lord Septimius join us in my ready room tomorrow at three."

"A tribunal then, sire." It was a statement.

“Indeed. In honor of Tertius’s past dedications, there will be no open trial.” Sextus remembered the strain of the last one. “Quintus and Septimius will serve as judges. Their deep enmity towards Tertius should serve as a useful foil while I seek out some truth. ”

“In the Great Hall?”

“I’ll let you know.” He kept his back to the Secretary.

“Yes, sire.”

Silence passed. Sextus never heard him leave but knew he did. Avoiding the sudden urge to find out, he descended the carved, black volcanic rock staircase instead. He entered his private spa on the last tier, shielding his eyes from shards of color shattering off the scored, water-polished onyx. He always admired the overhanging trees shaped into a soaring dome by some long-dead gardeners. Cut into an S-shape, the small inlet pond was rimmed with polished basalt and connected to a larger one in an unbroken line. Surrounding flora screened the sun, keeping the temperature moderate and the pool well-shaded. Although he could not see them in the main section, he heard splashing and giggling. He had not known the Ramirez sisters had spent the night. Guess I could use a little company. He smiled.

“Amore,” Antonia called out, catching sight of Sextus. “We ordered breakfast for you.” She singsonged, flinging her long brown hair from a naked breast.

She was quickly tackled by her younger sister Lia. Their actions lightened his mood as the two young ladies tumbled, splashed, and shrieked. Sextus offered a small wave that went unnoticed in the tumult. He turned to reclimb the stair, not yet ready to retire his thoughts. I will need a list of scheduled Beta-Jumps, and track any proposed paths to Gamma ascension. I know the prophet will reappear soon. Sextus soon found himself once again on the second tier, where a female servant was waiting patiently.

“Have my horse saddled; I ride before breakfast.”

She bowed in acknowledgment and took off to find the stable master.

Is there something about this priest Tertius is holding tight? Tomorrow will be time enough to see where he stands. It's time to deal with that dwarf. Maybe I'll just quietly feed him to Quintus, then arrange a little talk with this priest. He knew that was a bad idea, but he felt all the better for it. Working inward toward the solution, he often considered the extremes first. After mentally tagging and compartmentalizing the entire situation, Sextus changed his mind and returned to the spa for food and physical recreation with the sisters. The ride can wait. Tomorrow's tribunal will be challenging enough.

The following afternoon, Lord Tertius Corvinus Faustus was led to the Great Hall of the Italia Legion under guard. From the disrespectful tone of the Guard Captain, Tertius realized the chances of him leaving alive were slight. His inter-legion networks confirmed that his authority as Legion Commander was suspended. Tertius knew Sextus did not accept failure lightly, not at this level. After all, he had allowed Dr. Markander to escape with the first clone ever to reach awareness, and he failed to protect the prophet in an embarrassing military defeat. But the icing that brought him here was recklessly exposing cloning operations to the law and the church.

At the last council meeting, he understood the brilliance behind Primus's call for censure. By forcing Sextus to intervene, Primus guaranteed there would be no open trial for Tertius. No unpredictable political arena for him to escape; only in open court can evidence be suitably weighed. He would be publically tried, disgraced, stripped of all power, and sentenced to a gruesome end. He didn't really care about that, for his death would serve Corvus as a reminder to others. What really pissed him off was that Primus had finally won. Sextus will use the Great Hall

to exhibit his absolute power. Tertius felt no ill will towards his old friend Sextus. Both had been keenly maneuvered and were challenged in their commitment to the Empire. Something that Tertius was not only proud to display but willing to sacrifice for.

The armed escort party stopped in the large entry hall to one of the building wings. Carrying long Swiss pikes, four additional guards in red tunics trimmed with gold marched up with Sergius to form the formal escort.

“What’s with the formal guard Sergius?” Tertius was surprised to see it. “This type of grandstanding is not like your master at all.”

“We are taking you to the Great Hall, Lord Quintus’s orders, sire,” Sergius announced.

“Quintus, huh? Who’s the other judge?” Sergius’s only response was to nod at the Guard Captain, gesturing for the escort party to begin.

“Only Quintus? I’m surprised your master would risk an open trial with that clown.” Tertius looked up, hoping to see something he could latch on to. Sergius remained impassive.

“Detail. Forward, march.” The Captain barked.

Turning as one, they marched down the long red runner. Light streaming in from the tall stained-glass windows magnified the arched corridor’s majesty. Its opulence annoyed Tertius. Such a waste of resources. He frowned. Not to be ridiculed, he hurried his short stride to match pace with the guards.

Charged and placed under house arrest, he’d been notified that command of his legions had been suspended. Any order not yet fulfilled was to be approved by Quintus’s administration before implementation. I should have anticipated this when I heard Septimius would also be here. Will he be the judge? Selecting a triumvirate member who sought to depose me, Sextus repairs only

nominal rents in the Council's fabric. He'll most likely use him with Quintus to get me off-balance. In that realization, Tertius saw a glimmer of hope.

Suddenly the beauty of the entrance hall came forward, and he now saw the intent behind the architecture. It was to install feelings of hope in all who petitioned the Empire. Then another thought occurred. Sextus would not want a public trial, but Quintus would. Typical of his type to openly use force. For fear to be effective, it must steep in the deep waters of a victim's imagination. Frustration set in as the escort party neared the entrance doors to the Great Hall. Quintus, my friend, I expect no quarter and shall give none. I promise, not until your last twitch of agonizing death will you know it was I who has defeated you. He knew his final orders would be carried out to the letter.

The escort stopped in front of the massive ten-foot gold-plated double doors leading to the Great Hall. They executed a right face with practiced precision extending their halyards to form a box around Tertius. Looking up at Sergius, Tertius wanted to thank him for the honor of the formal escort, but Sergius was oblivious, caught up in the moment. Moving to the front of the guard, the Captain performed a fluid about-face, eyes forward.

They waited in silence.

What now? Tertius thought, looking down the long corridor. Am I to be bound like an animal to slaughter? When no one moved, he finally understood. He was given time to consider his position and scheme pleas for repentance. It must be Sextus's doing. The only thing subtle about Quintus is his ability to hide ignorance.

Five minutes passed.

“Guard.” The Captain barked, “Shoulder arms.” They moved as one. “Post.” The guard turned as one at this command before fluidly marching down the corridor with the Captain in its wake.

Walking to the fore, Sergius waited as the high doors opened by themselves. Tertius noticed the cathedral-like chairs on the richly ornate dais were empty. Confused, he followed Sergius’s deliberate pace into the empty cavernous hall. Like a 12th-century church, long stained glass windows slatted its walls, with intermittent flying buttresses bracing the soaring gilded ceiling. There was no altar on the raised dais, only three tall-backed chairs surrounded by a semi-circle of flags—the standards of the legions. Interspersed with all the legion’s banners, large black banners of the I Italia hung proudly on the back wall. The light of day streaming through the tall southern windows gave the room a distinct feeling of power. Tertius slowed to a stop, amazed at the empty place, and not much surprised him.

So, no formal down dressing before execution, then. It is well, Sextus. You’re playing it cautiously, as you should. You must have considered I still have a few cards to play. Quintus must be severely disappointed; his insecurities rarely allow him to miss an opportunity to put power on display. Before continuing, he paused to take in the majesty of the Great Hall. The room had been carefully designed to give a central feel of power. The long center aisle was flanked by three-tiered oak benches for the provincial VIPs as the front ten rows were reserved for Procounsels and governors. It had a distinct courtroom feel.

Patiently waiting for Tertius to follow, Sergius resumed his course taking care to pace himself accordingly. Sweeping a banner aside, Sergius stopped at the threshold of a hidden door. “The High Lord Aelius awaits the pleasure of your company.” He nodded at the curtained doorway

down the end of a short hall. “Lord Tertius, it is good to have you back, if I may.” He held his bow.

“Thank you, noble Sergius.” He fondly touched the Secretary’s head, “You’ve faithfully served this great organization. I wish more would follow in your honest dedications.”

Aware of the double meaning, Sergius thought highly of Tertius, knowing it would be unwise to waste such a man.

Consciously fluid in gait, Tertius proceeded to the private office. Stopping at the thick woolen curtain entryway, he paused to align his focus. Be mindful of Sextus’s shrewdness, he cautioned himself. Then, shifting into his command persona, he strode into the room.

“Come, Lord Faustus, and be heard.” Sextus issued the formal greeting as superior.

The men seated on simple armchairs in Sextus’s central office did not bother to look up from their tablets. Understanding the lack of civility, Tertius looked around the efficient office as though he were studying it for insight—which he was. The simple adobe-colored walls held no trim accents. The floor was clay-tiled with no other architectural enhancements, presenting the room as purely provincial. Like a Spanish farmhouse, its raiment was simple; expedient. Sextus designed this, Tertius thought. Cold and efficient, it fits his Spartan attitude. He’s never cared much for flair; undoubtedly, he will question me similarly. Only a single window overlooked the cliff, and through it, the Mediterranean glimmered in the distance. Tertius absently orientated his position in the estate, filling in the floor plan as he waited for permission to sit—it did not come. A full minute passed before he was acknowledged; Quintus condescendingly spoke first.

“You waive your right to counsel?”

“I do.”

“And by waiving this right, you understand there is no chance of appeal.”

Tertius scoffed. “Appeal to whom?”

Quintus conferred with Sextus for a moment before continuing. “I have a report that states you ordered the assault on the cave. Why did you lie to the Council by claiming the prophet ordered it? What else have you lied about? Next, I suppose you will deny that your agents poisoned Octavius.”

Knowing he was looking for tells, Tertius recognized Sextus’s vacant scrutiny. He wants me off-balance. Do I play the killdeer defense? Draw him in?

Before Tertius could reply, Quintus continued the attack. “You’ve read the charges. In your incompetence to command, you let the Doctor escape, recklessly jeopardizing the whole cloning operation. Your ill-advised experiments in Chicago have led the authorities straight to Hologenesis, which had to be dismantled and relocated at great expense. And for some reason, you authorized three foolish attacks on some insignificant priest bringing in the full weight of Vatican intelligence.” Quintus finally looked up from the tablet. “Have I missed anything?”

Tertius shrugged. “Everything except why he’s called me here.” Tertius nodded at Sextus with his chin. “Lord, am I here to answer questions of importance or give your two jesters further justification for my execution?”

“What exactly happened with the prophet?” Septimius spoke next. “How is it that you risk the only vessel for his appearance?”

“My written reply to this . . . inquiry has addressed that.”

Septimius raised his hands in emphasis. “You see Lord Sextus? I told you there would be little accountability; he knows as much as we do. It’s pretty evident he’s been operating on the fly all along.” The judges waited expectantly.

“We await your response,” Sextus spoke for the first time.

“The prophet was driven from the Asker-Gamma by some unknown factor.” Came Tertius’s clipped reply, “Its attempt at transfer into the other clone was . . . unsuccessful. Which is consistent with prior jump procedures.”

Quintus snorted. “Your reply to this incident was purposely vague and remains so. Must I remind you of your allegiance to this body? Have you no honor?” He spat, “You owe fealty to this body as a council member and legion commander. Truth and discovery are required of your loyalty. Can you not see this?”

Tertius understood the goading and anticipated the tactics. He waited for a relevant question. Hiding behind your pet dog, are we Sextus? That’s not like you at all. He thought.

After a moment, Quintus resumed the press. “What was the point of capturing the priest in the first place?”

Tertius addressed Sextus directly. “Sire, it had been postulated that the priest may have help with Jump-transfers. The idea came from the entity in the Asker-Beta, who later called itself the Scarecrow, the very same that revealed itself as the prophet.” Tertius sighed, looking down. They can’t see it. Well, at first, I didn’t either.

“What of the priest’s party? Were any of them eventually captured?” Septimius kept his tone just marginally within the proper form of address between two equals.

“Nothing has changed; there are no traces of them.” Tertius shifted his stance.

“I find that a convenient story,” Quintus challenged. “Are we to believe the might of the IV Hispania to be so incompetent? Or just its leadership.”

Again, Tertius only addressed Sextus. “Sire, I fear the civility training of your pet dog may require some refreshing.” Tertius considered the back of his hand. “You know, the only thing an

animal truly learns is the consequence of its last action.” At this thinly veiled threat, Tertius caught a faint smile slip from Sextus.

“Why was the prophet commanding this mission, Lord Faustus?” Quintus continued.

Silence.

“What was the objective?” Septimius clarified.

Tertius just shrugged. *You figure it out.*

Sextus’s smile broadened. “Would you please sit down, Tertius?”

So then, not my head after all. Tertius thought, using all of his control to remain impassive. I knew I could count on Sextus’s intelligence. He’s no fool; he needs me yet. The change in Sextus was telling, but Tertius’s blood was up, so he remained standing. “It was the Scarecrow that insisted on the first two attempts to capture the priest. Before I left for Rome, he revealed himself as the prophet to me and one of my techs. I did not feel it was my place to restrain him—even if I could. He demonstrated his power by telepathically commanding a clone blank to kill Dr, Trios. There was little to be done in the face of such power.”

Quintus scoffed. “A convenient time for such a revelation. There has been no evidence of this ability *in any* of the clones. How do we know it wasn’t you who couched this so-called prophet?”

“If you doubt me, it’s all been duly recorded for verification.” He turned to address Sextus. “Sire, I did not lie to you or the Council. I acted prudently by withholding highly classified information. I have every reason to believe that the prophet was who he portended to be.”

Sextus just nodded. “I’ve come to the same conclusion.”

Quintus, unaware of the ramifications, continued his attack. “If true, how is it then that this so-called powerful prophet managed to get so easily defeated?”

Tertius finally turned to address Quintus. “We all heard the prophet when you challenged its authenticity.” He smirked, “Your own brother, huh? Damn.”

For Quintus, the smug look on Tertius’s was maddening. Agitated by this memory, Quintus could not help but continue his attack.

“Well then, Lord Tertius,” He leaned forward. “Perhaps you can explain how this party of rabble not only defeated your failed attempts to capture the Priest. Twice. But also managed to escape your famed scouting network. You can hardly stand there and deny that incompetence allowed this situation to arise. But more importantly, the doctor has reappeared in your zone. We are all curious as to why he would do so, but before we get to that, how in the hell did the doctor escape Croatia in the first place?”

“That is still a mystery to us; they may have had some help.” Amused by the reaction he got out of Quintus, Tertius finally sat on the small end table, where he began to carefully examine his left hand. “But that is not why my presence was requested here.” Amused by his own word choice, he changed tack. “You would spurn my standing, Quintus, but in stature, are we not equal? Did we not both drink from ambition’s tit? From the very mother who bred us for a single purpose? In this, are we not brothers?”

“Truly spoken,” Quintus conceded, sitting back. “I agree that we all have a role to play, so allow me to play mine. We need a better understanding of these clone jumps, such as why some are stable and others not? A better understanding of the nature of these now . . . animated clones. So again, I ask: how is it that the prophet manifested in this Asker-clone, only to be driven off by the very priest he pursued?”

“That is also hidden from me.” Tertius spread his little arms, the half-lie coming effortlessly.

Dropping his previously demanding tone to an exasperated one, Quintus continued the interview. “Can you at least postulate as to how it is your fugitive Croatian doctor suddenly turned up in the same cave with the priest?”

Again, Tertius spread his arms with a shrug.

“How close are you to recapturing the Doctor.”

“Close enough.”

Tertius knew precisely where the party from the cave was; he always did. It was not hard to figure out where they went to roost. In fact, his Secretary had reported on their location just before Tertius left for the tribunal.

“You said earlier that the doctor and his party may have had some outside help?” Sextus interjected, “What makes you say that?”

“Remember when Dr. Markander had escaped with the first jumped clone? I believe it was some of your men, Quintus, of the II Germania, that reported the demise of the Croatian agents on the Pelješac Peninsula.” Tertius’s subtle calling out of his source within Quintus’s Legion was dangerous, but he wanted him to know he was vulnerable. Besides, his spy had already been recalled.

“Yes, I’ve read your agent’s report,” Quintus countered, amused at the exchange. In a gesture of contempt, he flicked something off his pant leg.

Tertius grinned. “Are you so ready to believe that an overworked doctor—transporting a possibly insane clone—would kill his assistant in cold blood? The same assistant who was in the process of helping him escape. Then what? He shoots five ex-special forces Croatian Rangers with their own weapons? Then, in a foreign country with no papers, mind you, this doctor—bordering

on exhaustion—somehow manages to escape without a trace? Believe me, he had help, and a lot of it. Most likely, the same help he had escaping the trap in the cave.”

“Are you suggesting that our own . . .” Having had heard enough of this upstart dwarf, Quintus shot out of his chair. “I will . . .”

Sextus cut Quintus off. “Gentlemen, I see no benefit in rehashing circumstantially imprecise events. The Doctor is still at large; his appearance in the cave indicates he is somehow still involved. As to who he’s working with and to what end is the question that remains at hand. But ultimately, this does-not-alter-the-plan. Phase One has been initiated, and all of you are well aware of its implications. I insist you place your vehemence towards the common end. I’m moving the timing for Akyaka-Kars forward. It will now be in conjunction with the India port attacks. Gentlemen, except for Octavius, we are the only ones who know of this operation. I need it to remain that way. Tertius, your V Africana group, will be involved in the assault. I reassigned them to the XII Fulminata, with Septimius taking command of all strike cohorts.”

At this, Tertius raised an eyebrow. Quintus slowly lowered himself back into his seat. But Septimius remained standing.

“Sire, I must object . . .”

Sextus held up a finger. “Quintus, you will focus on who is aiding the Doctor and why. Begin with our known resources within the Church. You are authorized to initiate option epsilon against Bechou if the situation presents itself. I’m in the process of reshuffling command, and Sergius will be sending out new orders when it’s completed.” He looked them over, getting silent acknowledgment from each. He knew that word of his confidence in Tertius would quickly spread throughout the Council. Any remaining dissent will become isolated and dampened.

“Tertius, you will continue your work on producing stable jumps. I want a detailed report on jump progress in three days, including all theoretical conjectures. Please send all relevant data on the possible whereabouts of the cave party to Quintus’s Administrator. The priest is unimportant, but I want to meet this Dr. Markander.” As Sextus rose, they all stood. “Phase Two elements are ordered to prepare for immediate mobilization. I expect all secondary units to be at full combat readiness within the week.” He looked the men over. “Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Quintus saluted, with Septimius quickly joining him. Tertius stood and bowed fully.

“Gentlemen, you have work to do.”

Outside on the steps of the Legion Hall, Tertius acknowledged Lord Septimius’s hostile look. “Another time, Septimius. . . perhaps we can have a talk. You know, share some memories.” He smiled coldly.

“Do not think Octavious’s murder will go unchallenged, you little shit. You were wounded in there. Be assured that after we assume command of your research sites, the Hispania Legions will soon follow. But fear not your future, my little Faustus; I hear Lord Primus will need help after he gets four of the new Australian legions. Perhaps you could find work cleaning clone shit in the Parthian’s Black Cohort.” He laughed as he stepped into the circle of his bodyguards. “That’s *if* you survive what’s coming to you.”

Tertius knew it was just thin bravado covering Septimus’s fear. But he was right about one thing. I’ve lost stature and part of the V Africana, which can’t be helped. What Sextus will do next is what matters. If I don’t have a piece of Phase Two, it’s over—I’m finished. I must make my operations indispensable, but how? He motioned away his approaching guard.

“I assume you understand the necessity of this proceeding.” The voice startled him out of his thoughts. “You see that my hands were tied.” Unescorted, Sextus approached from behind.

“I understand.” Tertius looked up at Sextus, his blue-green eyes luminous. “At times, it becomes necessary to remind one of one’s importance in a friendship.”

“I agree. One can get too wrapped up in private mechanizations.” He met Tertius’s gaze. After all these years, the power that flowed from the little man still caught him off balance.

Tertius climbed the stairs to stay level with Sextus as they talked. “I am still bound to *my* principals, even though others around me seem to have theirs flying apart.”

“I recognize commitment to the Legacy,” Sextus stopped on a lower stair, “That is also my only purpose. But I also keep important friends in view.”

“Then the old bonds remain, Sextus, my friend,” Tertius stated it plainly.

“Yes, I look forward to your more . . . candid revelations. You, of course, have resumed the jump experiments.”

“Yes, sire. I’ve assigned Dr. Matthews from the original Hologenesis group to help solve some clone-jump issues. He’s building a team now to look into the emergence issues.”

“I look forward to your report.” Sextus paused, teetering on the edge of the stair. “How is it the Doctor came to be in that cave? It does not seem likely.”

“Honestly, sire, I have no clue. But I will tell you this, other than Minerva, it appears that there is another hand in play, and it is not one of the Capitoline Guardians. These clones seem to play a role on some spiritual field of battle, and . . .” He looked off for a moment. “Like the prophet’s appearance in the Asker-Gamma, they have specific knowledge of past events. I have a team looking into it.”

“That’s a bit cryptic coming from you, but the prophet *did* display uncanny knowledge of our operations. What else have you uncovered?”

“These entities, or entity . . . ” Tertius looked off again. “There’s definitely some motive behind their actions that I . . . I can’t say anything else other than just conjecture. The Munroe-Gamma is growing in power and needs to be watched.”

“For what?” Sextus looked directly at him. “What really happened between the Asker-Gamma, and you? What’s the real reason behind the Asker-Gamma’s pursuit of the priest? From what I’ve been told, the priest killed the Asker-Beta, and this might be just some vendetta thing from a crazed clone. As simple as that sounds.”

“I don’t see it that way. I think both may have been avatars in a much bigger game.”

Sextus considered that. He didn’t think of the priest as an avatar, but it made sense. “What possibly could have intimidated you enough to expose the Asker-Gamma to council without approval?”

The light of Tertius’s eyes intensified. “The entity that called itself Scarecrow revealed its true power to me that I might believe its claim to be the prophet of Minerva. It demanded to be brought to Council, and I did not see any reason to deny its claims.”

Sextus replied flatly. “Well, it certainly proved its relationship to Minerva—we all heard it.”

Tertius heard Sextus’s impatience and knew time was running out. “It’s not that it knew Minerva—I think it *was* Minerva or something just as powerful.”

Silence.

“If you return to the Hispania Legion, how long will it take to formulate this . . . hypothesis of yours?”

The word *'if'* was loud and clear. "That wholly depends on you, sire."

"Yes." Sextus paused in thought. "I'm contented to leave things as they are, but I need answers quickly." He pointed his finger at Tertius, saying, "This is a priority."

"Yes, sire." Tertius bowed as an equal, and before another word could be said, he took to the stairs, beckoning his personal guard.

Sextus watched the dwarf for a few paces. "Tertius, there *is* one more thing."

Tertius paused, holding up a hand to stay his guard. "Sire"

"I read your planning team's RAID analysis for the Akyaka-Kars assault—it's most impressive. Do you really think only three cohorts are needed?"

Tertius turned. "Three and the V Africana's Black Cohort. He knew Sextus understood the tactics. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm curious about the exit strategy. Passing right through the Russian base seemed reckless initially, but it's simple and obvious. I thought it canny; a trojan train, so to speak."

"We have my Military Advisor, Lieutenant Jeff Thomas, to thank for that."

"I thought so. I followed your man's battles in the inter-legion VSA—Virtual Strategic Assault games. I thought his instincts sound."

"Thank you, sire. I will pass that on." Tertius turned to leave.

"One detail I would like to address." Sextus kept his tone neutral.

"Sire?" Tertius spoke without turning to face him.

"After your advisor completes his observational duties on the attack, instead of retreating with the XII Fulminata Legion, I would like him to lead the weapon transport team personally."

Tertius closed his eyes. "I had thought it best for him to remain with the observation team during the diversionary assault on Hyderabad, sire. It would give him some great experience. The

III Fulminata's logistical officer and comm-engineer can handle the transport; they are, after all, familiar with that territory."

"I agree. The Third's logistics officer should remain with the transport crew. Truly, he's a good man but not fully aware of the difficulties. Besides, who better than Lt. Tomas to identify the project's RAID detail?"

"Sire, the Third's man has all the field experience." Tertius used his final argument. "Is it wise to have one of the mission planners exposed to potential capture?"

"If he's captured and chemically interrogated, they will be confused all the more. You should know that better than anyone, Tertius. It's a good option for misdirection."

"That may be a beneficial outcome, sire, but I'm hesitant to risk the asset."

Sextus realized at that moment that the whispers about Tertius and this young American might have a ring of truth. Tertius was certainly protecting him. "I should look into this, Lt. Tomas, and perhaps have his character sifted, but there is no time for all that." Sextus waited for Tertius to face him. "Lord Tertius?"

Tertius slowly turned to his lord. His posture subtly hardened. "I guess we will have to see if he survives the mission."

"Yes, there is that, but your advisor *will* lead it. It will give him the necessary operational experience he poorly lacks."

Silence.

"Well, Tertius?"

Tertius slowly bowed, but this time uncharacteristically compliant. "Yes, sire. Of course, you are correct." He said under his bow. "Consider it done." Without waiting for dismissal, he casually strode off in that strangely fluid gait that belied his stature.

As Sextus watched him leave, he was concerned about Tertius's ominous message of a spiritual battlefield and his own doubts. When the prophet reappears, how can I test him? More to the point, how do I veil that test? The prophet can't be Minerva—that makes no sense.

Troubled by this, he strolled through the gardens, bypassing the main entrance to the bathing area. Minerva will handle itself; I have no power in that arena. Shifting focus, he felt much better now that Tertius remained in his plans. If this was all to work out, he would need the Leprechaun to perform some of his miracles.

“And if Tertius *is* behind the poisoning, that means he has decided to play his own hand, which means either Primus or Septimius is next. Do I interfere?” He vocalized the conflict. “All cascading casual events are always initiated by a logical operand; act or don't.”

Lost in thought, he sat on one of the weathered stone benches. I cannot trust Primus with the III Fulmanata—he's too reckless. Almost an hour had passed before he knew the best course of action. Standing to stretch, he smiled now that the issue was compartmentalized.

Recognizing the change, an eager attendant handed him a drink of calvados mixed with mineral water. He watched as Antonia, his newly acquired consort, climbed out of the bath; her olive skin shone as she stooped to pad dry her hair. Yes, dance with the people you brought. An interesting American maxim, he mused. At least you have some idea what tunes they are willing to dance to.

“Send word for Sergius,” He called out.

Reclining against a tree in the east garden above the spa, he watched through the prism of his crystal highball glass as Antonia covered herself with a robe of veils. The silk flowed sensually over her shapely form. Pressing the cool drink against his forehead, he thought of simpler times. I must get back to Normandy—it's been too long.

Turning to gauge his mood, Antonia smiled demurely, appreciating the look of a contented man.

Ah, where else can you find such a beautiful woman than here in Sicily, he thought, admiring her shape under the thin veil of her silken flowing robes. Her overtly sensuous walk twitched her tail at him.

Or as excitingly dangerous.

A week earlier, his personal guard had discovered a small ceramic kindjal cleverly concealed in the sash of one of her robes. The needlepoint, a double-edged, grooved knife, was explicitly designed to penetrate tight-mesh armor like the one he wore for protection. His personal guard had carefully sedated her for interrogation. Under a chemical haze, she revealed her father had given it to her to protect her from camp soldiers. She had protested against such a vile tool but only agreed because her father misunderstood why she was hired. The interrogation revealed that she was just an innocent. After sleeping off the effects, she had no recollection of the interrogation. For her, it was just a vague dream. Sextus had the weapon re sewn into her sash, replacing the ceramic blade with thin plastic.

Aware of her possessiveness, he had no doubt she would use it if callously offended, and he appreciated that thinking. Sextus noted to send a small token of appreciation to her parents. He preferred the unsophisticated women from the county—their carnality was easier to read.

Reclining back against the tree, he again reflected on the cave events in Arrasate, trying to fathom its place in the chain of events. How is it that the Doctor came to be there? It just doesn't make sense unless the Church is behind it all. That they somehow found him and got him out of Croatia is a long shot at best. At any rate, Arazola needs to be dealt with. The Priest and Interpol

agent are lackeys who work for nothing but dawdling bureaucratic fools, and the Doctor? What can he do with the one clone? If he goes public with it, it will be challenged, and again, we will benefit from the confusion and misdirection.

Unaware that nearly five minutes of contemplation had flown by, his thoughts were interrupted. Secretary Sergius entered the spa handing him the latest UN intel and confirmation that the additional elements of the Immortals were finally in place. Glancing at it, he slid into the tepid water. Our agents inside UNESCO are ready. Corvus's period of religious strife is about to begin.

"Sire?" Sergius prompted after waiting a respectful passage of time.

Sextus returned the tablet, silent for a few more moments. "Arrange a meeting with logistics and personnel," Sextus commanded. "In one week, transfer three of Quintus's Germania legions, three from Primus's Parthian, to Tertius's direct command. He will be assuming operational command in the New Assyrian Territories. Once Lord Octavious's replacement is settled, Primus will transfer his command along with the remaining Parthian and four Australian legions to the Eastern Africana Territories. Primus will continue to direct all port operations from there. Inform Lord Herminius that three Australian reserve legions will be in Iran in two weeks. The remaining Australian legions are to be assigned to the Fulminata."

"Yes, sire. A worthy move." Sergius carefully reserved his elation.

"I hope so." Sextus eyed Sergius, allowing the compliment.

"You're transferring the V Africa labs, sire?"

"Yes, to Onus," He replied absently. "When appropriate, inform Lord Primus that the III Parthian shall be added to Tertius's inland forces to support the Fulminata. They will be a bit thin in that region, and Primus needs to be focused on the Persian Gulf and Red sea port targets. Tertius

will retain the IV Hispania and the III Canadian research sites. I want to avoid any risk of infighting.”

“Then I’d recommend the reassignment of Octavius’s III & VI Fulminata, along with Lord Tacitus’s II Finnish, to Tertius’s command to support the Black Sea operations.” Sergius offered; he had anticipated this realignment. It was the logical move.

Sextus considered this. He could see why the Finnish legion should be included. Why the III Fulminata? Considering their position in the Levant, Sergius thinks it’s the right move, and it is a cloning facility. However, the Syrian uprising is still spiraling, drawing more nations into the conflict.

“I agree on the II Finnish—see to it. However, as to the III, I don’t want any distractions for Tertius during the port attacks, but I see why you suggest it. Remind me when the time is proper. Transfer the VI and IX Fulminata immediately.”

“Sire.” His tone was hesitant. “The IX is 65% below operating efficiency.”

“So, siphon some of the new Australian replacements and get it up to operational effectiveness.

“Sire, perhaps it would be better to transfer some Parthian cohorts already in the region?”

“It might. Sacrifice unit cohesion for experience—ok, do it. Who is next in line for Octavius if, or when, he should pass?”

“There are only three viable candidates, sire. I would wager that in the end, it will be either the T1 Capt. Stathos, the current T2 Cmdr. Gaius, or the military advisor Lt. Murtas.”

“Who would you select?”

“Considering the coming mayhem of the port attacks, I would select Stathos. We will need stability in that zone, and civilian interaction will be key. Gaius is far too devious; he may take

unwelcome opportunities during the chaotic aftermath. Murtas, although a brilliant tactician, is too inexperienced; he needs seasoning.”

“Very well. Have the legion transfer list for me in three hours.”

“Sire.” Sergius bowed and left.

Enjoying the soothing waters, Sextus closed his eyes and began to doze when a subtly delicious thought occurred.

I wonder if there's a way to use those crazy Jumped clones against the Church?